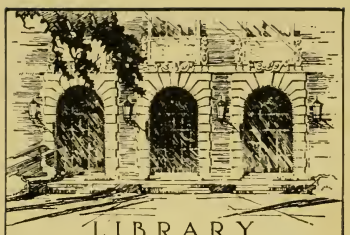
A Great Platonic Friendship

W. Dutton Burrard



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A GREAT PLATONIC FRIENDSHIP.

VOL. III.

A GREAT

PLATONIC FRIENDSHIP

BY

W. DUTTON BURRARD

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE THIRD VOLUME.

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A GREAT PLATONIC FRIENDSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLATONIC BUBBLE BURSTS.

For a moment Grandby is too terrified to move; then suddenly he falls down upon his knees beside her, and reverentially raises her still, pale face. Her eyes are closed in complete unconsciousness.

He looks wildly about him, as though in the hopes of obtaining some assistance, but only the trunks and the foliage of the silent trees meet his eye. He is alone in the depths of the deserted wood, and beside him is lying the form of the girl he loves, pale, motionless, and senseless.

The evening wind blows chillily across

the mass of undergrowth and fern; a faint mist is creeping stealthily through the trees, and dusk is rapidly descending, enshrouding the wood in semi-darkness; and there she lies, giving no sign of life, a patch of dark grey colour against a russet ground.

What shall he do? The awful thought strikes him that perhaps she may be dying. With feverish haste he opens her collar and dress, exposing her exquisitely moulded neck to the cold night air, and then with his handkerchief he fans her death-like face. And still she gives no sign of life.

An exclamation of despair escapes him, and, throwing aside the handkerchief, he commences to violently rub her hands between his own, remembering suddenly having once read that the best remedy for a fainting-fit was to promote the circulation in the extremities of the body. But is this merely a fainting-fit? he asks himself, in painful doubt, or is it something worse? He does not know—he cannot tell—he dare not think. Pale almost as the senseless girl beside him, he presses his ear against her bosom and listens at

her heart. To his great joy, he hears it feebly beating, and he redoubles his exertions.

'Diana, my love, my love!' he cries, beside himself with fear and anxiety, 'open your eyes and look at me, and tell me that you are not dying!'

As though in obedience to his impassioned pleading, at this moment her eyelids quiver. A low sigh issues from her lips, she slightly moves her hand, and then a shiver shakes her body, and her eyes slowly open. She passes her hand wearily across her brow.

'Where am I?' she murmurs softly to herself. 'What has happened?'

Trembling with the greatness of his joy, he leans over her and kisses her on the forehead.

'Diana, my little darling!' he whispers, lovingly. 'You have come back to me, my pet. Oh! I was so frightened to see you lying there so pale and still!'

She raises her eyes in dreamy wonder, and softly strokes his cheek.

'What is it, Frank, dear old boy?' she murmurs. 'What am I doing here? I do not understand.'

'My darling, you must not talk. Lie still for a moment till you regain your strength. We were talking about my sister's death, and you were suddenly taken ill, and you fainted.'

'Ah!'

The exclamation escapes from her lips in a wail of agony, and she presses her hands to her eyes, as though to shut out some awful vision. In a moment memory has returned to her, and with it the full consciousness of her position.

'Hush, Diana, love!' he says, in soothing tones. 'You must not be excited. Knowing that you were far from well, it was madness of me to talk about poor Charlie—but——'

'Ah! not that name again!' she cries, with a sudden gasp. 'I cannot stand it—oh! it is too terrible—Frank, tell me—am I going mad?'

He believes her to be wandering in her speech, so, sick with fear, he attempts to soothe her with soft, comforting words, breathing of love and tenderness. His one thought now is how to get her home. Convinced as he is of the gravity of her illness, he feels that it is imperative to

remove her at once from the damp dews of that rapidly darkening wood. If she cannot walk, he will be compelled to leave her where she is and run back to the hotel for assistance.

'Diana,' he says, speaking in earnest tones so as to fix her attention, 'you must not remain here a moment longer—it may be the death of you. Listen to me! Do you think that you have strength enough to walk home? If not, tell me so, and I will hasten back to the hotel and procure assistance.'

'I can walk,' she says, wearily, attempting to rise. 'We dare not risk an *exposé*. Help me, Frank dear! Yes, that is right! Now let me lean on you.'

He passes his arm around her waist and supports her tottering figure, and together in this fashion they slowly make their way up the little path leading through the balsam. The mist is rapidly increasing, and the whole wood is now enveloped in a cloud of white, which gives to it a weird and ghostly effect in the dying twilight. Pale with anxiety and fear, he whispers soft words of encouragement, pointing out to her the rugged roots appearing through

the soil, and exhorting her to bear up bravely to the end. But it is a toilsome climb before them, and more than once he feels her figure weigh heavily against his arm as though she were about to fall again.

'Had we not better stop and rest?' he asks, anxiously.

'No, no!' she cries, hoarsely. 'I must hurry on—there is no more rest for me.'

Panting, breathless, trembling in every limb, she continues to mount the steep ascent, and, in spite of his repeated entreaties, refuses to stop for a moment to regain her strength.

'Then I will carry you,' he says, and he passes both arms under her and lifts her from the ground.

He traverses the ground with long strides; the excitement of the moment lending him a fictitious strength; her *petite* form becomes as nothing in his arms. She places one arm around his neck, and her little golden head falls against his shoulder. Occasionally he bends over her and tries to catch the expression of her face, but in the sombre gloom he can see nothing beyond that it is still of a deadly

white. He speaks to her soft, soothing words of comfort and encouragement, but she does not answer him. She lies there calm and still, giving no sign of life beyond an occasional deep-drawn sigh.

In a few moments he is standing, with his beloved burden in his arms, upon the main road, under protection of the large projecting rock. He pauses here, both to regain his breath and to consider what to do next. He half fears that she is again in a fainting condition, but to his surprise she suddenly addresses him quite calmly.

'You must put me down here, Frank,' she says. 'I must try to walk, and you had better follow after me, to see that I arrive safely home.'

'But, Diana—my darling—you cannot walk.'

'I can try,' she answers, with a feeble smile.

'But, tell me,' he says, anxiously. 'Are you feeling any better? Do you still feel very weak?'

'Yes—I think I am better,' she answers, steadying her voice with an effort.

'But I must hear again to-night how you are getting on. Could you write me

a little note at half-past seven and drop it from your balcony? I will be down below.'

'I will try,' she murmurs, wearily, and then she suddenly breaks forth into a loud, discordant laugh. 'Ah! 'tis strange!—'tis horrible!' she cries, pressing her hands against her brow. 'Ah! my God—my God—what a fatality!—I feel that I am going mad! But what am I saying?' she asks, in suddenly subdued tones. 'Am I talking strangely, Frank? My head seems whirling round and round, and I don't know what I say. Did you say that Mr. Loftus told you? Does he live on the ground-floor of the club?'

'Yes—yes—Diana,' he answers, soothingly. 'Never mind Mr. Loftus now—his room is number nine, first on the left on the ground-floor—but come home quickly. I must see you home myself—you are not well enough to go alone.'

'Number nine!' she murmurs. 'First on the left on the ground-floor! Yes—I will remember that;' and then she passively allows him to lift her again into his arms and to carry her in the direction of the hotel.

By this time the mist has settled into a dense, grey fog, and, consequently, he proceeds quickly along the road, without fear of being recognised. What a godsend the fog is! He shudders to think what might have been the consequences had it not so opportunely arrived.

Once he discerns a dark figure looming through the mist, and at the sight he quickens his pace to a run and hurries past. The figure stops as though in doubt and looks back, pauses irresolutely for a moment, and then continues its progress forward. Grandby does not hesitate for a moment. Fearing pursuit, he quickens his speed, and does not stop until he reaches the garden-gate, completely out of breath.

He leans for support against the iron railings.

'Can you stand, darling?' he whispers.

She nods assent, and he gently releases his hold and places her on her feet.

'Go up to your room at once,' he says, 'and if you are well enough, darling, try to send me that little note.'

'At half-past seven, you said?'

'Yes—I am dining out, and shall not be home till late.'

'Good-night, Frank,' she says, faintly. 'You are very good to me. How can I ever repay you?'

'By loving me!' he whispers, fiercely, folding her in his arms. 'Love me, darling, —always love me—that is all I ask.'

She throws her arms round his neck and draws his face down towards her, and kisses him twice with a passionate *abandon.*

'Good-night,' she says, in tones of melting tenderness. 'Good-night, Frank, my own darling—my beloved boy! Remember in the future, if anything should ever arise to shake your belief in me, that my love for you was true and pure. Good-night and good-bye!' and, with a long-drawn sigh, she tears herself away, and disappears into the surrounding gloom.

He remains standing there a moment or two listening to her retreating footsteps, and then, as the sound dies out, he slowly walks after her in the direction of the hotel, fearful lest she may have fallen fainting in the road. But, to his inexpressible relief, he finds the road quite clear.

He enters the house and stands in the

hall, straining his ear to catch some sound. Then a door shuts somewhere down the corridor above, and, feeling assured that she has arrived quite safely at her own room, he turns round and strolls thoughtfully over to his own house.

It is half-past six as he enters, and he throws himself down into his deep arm-chair, thoroughly exhausted with his exertions.

It has been a very terrible experience! Until he saw her lying there beside him as though dead, he had never known himself the great strength of the love he bore her. It was at that moment, when she was lying in that darkening wood, with her eyes closed and the pallor of death upon her face, that he thoroughly became aware of the intensity of his passion. And now, as he considers it, it frightens him; for it is no pure platonic affection that he bears towards the girl, but a love of a totally different nature—a love before which all fraternal affection dwindles into nothingness.

How could he have been so blind? How was it possible that he had never discovered the true nature of his love before?

Now that the scales have fallen from his eyes, the fact becomes self-evident, and he knows that not only now does he love her with a love totally different from what he has supposed, but also that he has done so for weeks and weeks before—from the very moment that he first set eyes upon her. And he has never known! Never for one moment has he suspected the real truth! He has talked to her and fondled her, caressed her and kissed her, held her in his arms, all under the impression that his love for her was pure and spiritual—and all the time his love for her has been physical, carnal, a love of the flesh, fleshly.

Ah! God—what shall he do? He springs from the chair, and, with a face white with fierce anxiety, stands in the middle of the room, stunned by the awfulness of the disclosure.

What can he do? How can he confess to the trusting girl the enormity of his crime? How can he ever bring himself to tell her of the treacherous part that he has played?

Great beads of perspiration stand upon his forehead, and he falls back in his chair, and covers his face in his hands. What

will she say to him? What will she think of him for having inveigled her under false pretences to grant him her calm, sisterly affection?

He loves her—he loves her madly! Ah! fool that he was, to be so blind. What power of wickedness could have made him so dead to the true promptings of his heart? In what way can he ever repair the terrible wrong that he has done?

He must tell her—he must confess to her his weakness—he must stand before her as a traitor, cowardly and contemptible!

And how will she bear the news?

He dare not ask himself the question. He sees her, in his imagination, crushed, bowed down, humbled to the dust, all the gentleness and purity of her modest maidenhood trampled on and outraged by the nature of his passion; and he hears her voice raised in passionate denunciation of his treacherous cowardly conduct.

What is it that he has done? He has joined her in a clandestine intimacy, he has sworn to her a platonic love, he has gained her sisterly affection, he has held her to his heart, he has kissed her and

caressed her and called her by every endearing name—and she has allowed him to do so, feeling that his brother's love gave to him a right to treat her thus familiarly. And all the time his love has been other than platonic! All the time he has deceived her.

Ah! God—he dare not contemplate her lasting sense of shame! He dare not picture to himself the result of his confession.

The clock on his table recalls him from his agitated reverie, by striking in little silvery tones the hour of seven. He hastily rises, and calls his servant. However grave may be one's mental torture, whatever agony one may be suffering, it is impossible to still the clamourings of one's inner man. In spite of the overpowering weight upon his mind, he cannot prevent himself from feeling hungry, and, though his moral sense is crushed beneath the knowledge of his guilt, conventional habit prompts him to be punctual at his friend's table.

Shortly before half-past seven, he issues from his house, with a heart like lead, to spend a convivial evening at the club.

The mist has not dispersed. It hangs in a dense cloud over the face of the mountains, effectually screening the moon and stars from sight. He walks round the corner of the hotel, and stands on the gravel path, gazing anxiously up at Diana's window. Is she better or is she worse? Will she be able to send him news?

His heart stands in his mouth, as he asks himself this question. He has not to wait long before his doubts are set at rest. A door opens on the balcony above, emitting a stream of light across the thickened atmosphere, and then a figure emerges, and stands for a moment looking down. In that figure he has no difficulty in recognising Miss Forsdyke, and he takes a hurried step forward, and whispers softly, 'Diana.'

As he speaks, she turns away, and at the same moment a little note comes fluttering down, alighting at his feet. He hastily picks it up, and presses it passionately to his lips. Ah! how madly he loves the fragile girl!

The door closes and the streak of light disappears, and all again is fog and gloom. He hurries back to his room, and by the

light of his lamp tears open the note and reads it.

'My DEAR, DEAR FRANK,

'Will you be glad to hear that I am better? An hour's rest has quite composed me and brought me to my natural self. What could have been the matter with me? Never before to the best of my remembrance have I fainted. I think that I must have been overworking myself in my aunt's sick-room—as I told you, she has been very exacting and trying of late. Ah! Frank, you are very, very good to me—I do not deserve such touching kindness and tenderness as you display. Did I say anything very strange? I have an idea that I spoke very wildly and excitedly, but I have no distinct remembrance of anything I said. You must not think the worse of me, if I said anything *very* dreadful! And now good-night, dear Frank——my aunt is calling me—and may God bless you. Your loving sister,

'DIANA.

'P.S.—I will try to be there to-morrow, so go there on the chance—but do not wait.

If I am not punctual, you may conclude that I am not well enough to come. Good-night, my brother—and may I dream of you to-night!'

He raises the letter to his lips with reverential tenderness.

Good-night, my brother! How shall he ever confess to the trusting girl who wrote these simple words, the story of his treachery?

CHAPTER II.

GRANDBY SEES AN APPARITION.

GRANDBY on arriving at the club finds Loftus standing alone in the ante-room, gnawing his moustaches with evident impatience. He apologises profusely for being late.

'Don't mention it, my dear chap!' cries Loftus, with a beaming face. 'The fellows have not gone in many minutes. Come on, or we shall miss our soup.'

Every place in the dining-room is occupied, so, accompanied by much good-natured chaff, they wend their way into the inner room, and take their seats at the table *tête-à-tête*.

Loftus is looking distinctly pleased with himself and the world at large. He spreads his napkin carefully over his knees,

arranges his knives and forks to his convenience, glances casually at the menu, and orders a quart of dry champagne. To him this is the pleasantest moment of the day. *Blasé* as he is with regard to most things in life, he still possesses sufficient energy to appreciate at its true worth the delights of a good dinner.

'Take your glass, my boy,' he cries, 'I have a toast to propose which can only be drunk in the very first glass of the evening to do it proper honour. Success to the Great—Platonic—Friendship!'

He raises his glass to his lips, and tosses it off at one gulp, replacing it with a sigh of the most intense satisfaction. There are still some things worth living for in his philosophy, and the first taste of champagne on a dry throat is certainly not the least entitled to consideration.

Grandby, flushing crimson, puts down his glass untasted.

'Hullo!' says Loftus, in unaffected astonishment. 'What's up now, I wonder?'

'Nothing is up, as far as I know,' says Grandby, irritably.

'Now then, don't lose your back hair, old chap,' says Loftus, in a reproving

paternal tone. 'You are like a box of fusees, liable to ignite on the least approach to friction. Now, just gulp down your sense of annoyance and tell me, as calmly as you can, why, in the name of Gehenna's blazes, haven't you drunk that toast.'

'It is not a subject for joke,' answers Grandby, shortly.

'For *joke!* No, you are right there! It is a subject for admiration of the most unqualified order. I tell you frankly, Grandby, that I think you are a very wonderful fellow! But it is always the case with you quiet, unassuming chaps—you are as cunning as Lucifer himself, and as deep as the deepest of artesian wells.'

'I don't see where the wonder comes into the question,' answers Grandby, coldly contemptuous. 'You talk just as though I had *invented* the idea of a platonic friendship. You must know that such intimacies have existed since the world began.'

Loftus smiles pleasantly.

'Don't be modest, old chap!' he says. 'To blow one's own trumpet in public is, I admit, a most objectionable practice, but between two friends, 'pon honour, a blast

or two occasionally is quite permissible. Besides, one ought never to think too humbly of oneself—in this world, if you can see no good in yourself, you may be quite certain that no outsider will take the trouble to point it out to you; they will be only too glad to accept your own estimate of yourself as gospel-truth. One should always insinuate one's own worth on all occasions in a delicate and unobtrusive manner. Of course to do this effectually is quite an art, for it is a totally different thing to vulgar braggadocio.'

'I do not doubt the truth of your philosophy,' observes Grandby, indifferently. 'But may I venture to ask whether it is *à propos* of anything particular, or whether it is merely a parenthetical gem of thought, too priceless to be retained another moment?'

'Certainly you may,' says Loftus, kindly. 'And I will try to answer you to the best of my very poor ability. In you I recognise a master-mind, for with consummate audacity you have attempted to reintroduce into society a state of fellowship between man and woman which for centuries past has been exploded. And you

have not only *attempted* it, but you have according to your own statement—and I would not venture to doubt you for a thousand worlds—actually accomplished it. Now, without wishing to flatter you in the least, I must tell you that in my opinion you are one of the most extraordinary men that the world has as yet produced; for without an effort you have effected that which, since the days of Adam, men have been attempting to perform, always with the same ignominious result. And consequently I consider it mere affectation on your part to try to pretend that you have done nothing of a highly remarkable character. You must allow me to congratulate you formally on the success of your stupendous conception.'

Loftus raises his glass, and with a merry twinkle in his eye makes a graceful inclination of his head in the direction of his friend.

'I trust that I have made my meaning plain,' he says, politely.

'Not in the least,' says Grandby, smiling feebly at his friend's solemn absurdity, and feeling rather at a loss as to what to say.

'It seems to me that you have been talking arrant nonsense. What the deuce has Adam to do with the question?'

'Well—Adam was probably the first man who ever attempted to form a platonic friendship with a woman,' says Loftus, gravely. 'Certainly the Bible does not mention the circumstance—but then there may have been reasons for the omission. As far as my feeble faculties can judge, the primary moral to be deduced from the teachings of the Pentateuch is that it is the duty of every human creature to embark upon the parental state as soon as circumstances will permit it. At any rate they all seem to have done it, and the details are so minutely recorded that one cannot but suspect that stress was intended to be laid on it, as being the most meritorious deed that mankind can do on earth. And so, if I am right in this conclusion, it was only natural that Adam's platonic efforts should have been omitted. Such an heterodox performance on his part was not to be handed down to posterity, for fear lest others should depart from the usual paths of life, and attempt to follow

his example. But of course everyone is quite entitled to his own opinions. *My* opinion on the subject is, that Adam *did* really at first attempt a platonic intimacy with his companion. But he failed—there is no doubt of that—otherwise we should not now be sitting here, discussing him. Certainly though, judging his attempt impartially, circumstances were against him. The Garden of Eden from all accounts was essentially a place for material enjoyment'

'You must be very deeply read, Loftus,' interposes Grandby, 'to possess such a minute knowledge of the thoughts and actions of our remote ancestors.'

'No, not in the least,' says Loftus, airily. 'I make my deductions not from reading books, but from studying human nature around me. As you say, you did not *invent* the idea of a platonic friendship. Since the world began, there have existed individuals so peculiarly constituted as to believe in the possibility of such a thing. From Adam, up to within the last century, men have attempted it, but they have all ignominiously failed. In latter years, of course, the world has grown wiser, and it has

come to the conclusion that such a state of intimacy is literally not possible—and so it has not been attempted. So you will easily understand why it is that I regard you as a stupendous marvel when you tell me that you have not only reintroduced the exploded idea, but that you have actually made it answer to your complete satisfaction. *You are the only man who has ever done it*—and, as such, you cannot deny that you are entitled to respect. You must really allow me to propose the toast again—and don't refuse to drink it this time, or I shall really begin to doubt the reality of your success. Now take your glass and drink—"Success to the Great Platonic Friendship."'

Grandby is keenly alive to the undercurrent of irony in Loftus' measured tones. Every word uttered by his friend stabs him like a knife, and, knowing as he does what a complete fiasco has been his attempt to establish a platonic friendship, he feels himself totally incapable of retorting. Had he but been spoken to in that way yesterday, before that he was himself aware of the true state of his feelings, buoyed up by the perfect confi-

dence he possessed in his own integrity of purpose, he could have given him back sarcasm for sarcasm, banter for banter, gibe for gibe. But now all is changed. Instead of boldly combating his friend's insinuations, he sits still, with eyes cast down, unable to say a word, feeling as shamefaced and wretched as a man well can feel.

Loftus, with glass half-raised to his lips, eyes him curiously, reading him like an open book.

'There is something up,' he muses to himself. 'It strikes me rather forcibly that the platonic humbug has yielded to the prickings of the frail, frail flesh!' Aloud he says, in tones of well-assumed surprise, 'What!—Do you refuse again? My dear Frank, I implore you by all that's holy not to shake my belief in your success. It was such a grand, such a noble, such a truly elevated notion! Don't dash all my new-born hopes of the speedy approach of the millenium, for I have been making all the morning plans for the future on the assumption that at last the promised period of perfect peace——'

'Loftus—for God's sake drop the sub-

ject!' cries Grandby, with sudden energy. 'Don't you perceive how painful its discussion is to me? Propose some other toast, and let us have a dozen of them, and let us make a really merry night of it.'

As he speaks he takes up his glass, and tosses it off at one gulp. Loftus smiles approvingly.

'Butler,' he says, gravely. 'Fill up Mr. Grandby's glass. You are quite right, my boy—seek comfort in the bottle—there is nothing like it to drive dull care away. It acts like a magician. One is low and depressed—one takes a bottle of good champagne—and hey!—presto—one becomes at once a different man—*couleur-de-jaune* becomes *couleur-de-rose*. Now some people maintain that the same result may be effected through the medium of the church. My own mother is one of those poor deluded creatures. When she is attacked with indigestion, she walks to her room and kneels down and says a prayer, and—according to her own account—the indigestion disappears. Well, for my part, with no wish to be disrespectful or unfilial, I really don't believe her. If she were to take a swig at Mumm & Co., I could quite

understand her interior settling down more comfortably, but to be asked to believe that the Deity personally superintends these little arrangements of the old lady's inside, is really coming it a little *too* strong!'

In this way Loftus, with better tact than taste, deftly changes the conversation, and for the next quarter-of-an-hour he is engaged in detailing the peculiarities of his parents, who appear to be in their son's non-admiring eyes extremely second-rate sort of individuals.

'The old buffer actually gave me a New Testament,' he says, at the conclusion of a long story, alluding to the book as though it were some scorpion of a peculiarly aggressive disposition. ''Pon honour, as sure as I am a sinful wretch, he took it out of his pocket, handed it to me, and told me to read it diligently. If I had not had such an infernal champagne-headache at the time, I should have laughed outright in his face, and would have probably lost my chance of ever inheriting property in consequence—which only proves that champagne taken to excess often does one more good than harm. But-

ler, be more attentive, please—I have been watching Mr. Grandby's empty glass for over half-a-minute.'

Grandby allows his glass to be filled without demur.

On this particular evening, to Loftus' great delight, his young friend really displays a decided partiality for good wine. As fast as his glass is emptied it is filled, and as fast as it is filled it is emptied, so, between himself and the butler, he very soon manages to get outside a full quart of champagne. He is determined to forget the weight upon his mind, if only for an hour, and with this purpose he drinks recklessly, keeping pace with Loftus in his cups, and giving way to bursts of convivial gaiety.

Loftus is completely charmed. He views his friend's flushed face and sparkling eyes with looks of the deepest admiration. In his mental estimate of Grandby's character there has been only one point which has given him cause for sorrow, and that has been his remarkable lack of appreciation of wine and spirits. The thought of this one flaw has given him many hours of anxious meditation. It has seemed so sad

to him that a fine, noble character, such as Grandby's, should be so completely marred by one such lamentable failing!

But now, on this particular evening, Grandby has appeared in quite a new light. He has not only proved to Loftus, by his marked inclination for dry champagne, that his estimate of his character has been wrong, but he has shown himself capable of appreciating the highest states of conviviality. To Loftus the probable cause of this sudden change in his friend's customary habits is perfectly immaterial. He merely looks at the effect, and the more he looks the more he is delighted, and the more he is delighted the more he presses Grandby to fill his glass.

The consequence is inevitable—by eleven o'clock Grandby is in a state of riotous joviality. All cares and sorrows have vanished before the magic touch of the golden boy, and all the world has again become bright and smiling.

Loftus proudly exhibits him as though he were some peculiar species of biped hitherto unknown in the scientific world, walking him gaily from room to room, to show him off to his very best advantage

before the inmates of the club. He is filled with a sense of rapturous triumph, for he takes it as a proof of the irresistible influence he holds over the minds of his fellow-creatures.

'Look at him! Kindly regard him, if you please! Behold him converted from his narrow-minded ways! And remember that this is my—*my*—MY—work!'

This is the thought which occupies his mind as he stands in the billiard-room, watching Grandby amusing the fellows with his eccentric utterances. He is charmed, too, to see that his friend gets inebriated *in a gentlemanly way!* He creates no disturbance; neither does he make himself objectionable in any way; he merely becomes impregnated with wit and liveliness, causing the room to roar with laughter at his quick and pungent repartee.

'He is really a first-rate fellow,' murmurs Loftus to himself. 'Could I but only induce him to do this every night, he would be simply perfect. Spank me crimson, if he hasn't been and cut the billiard-cloth! I have never met a more delightful fellow in my life!'

This last proof of Grandby's recklessness

increases Loftus' admiration a hundredfold. He walks up to him and smacks him on the back, and calls him 'the best chap that ever stepped this earth!'

Grandby attempts a profuse apology for his awkwardness, but Loftus will not hear it for a moment.

'One apologises,' he says, grandly, 'only when one has been in error. *You* have done nothing wrong. On the contrary, you have done an action that reflects credit on your manliness, and I am proud to have you for my guest.'

By twelve o'clock Grandby is as merry as a king. Some one—it is Bramley, the orator—proposes cards—unlimited loo—a game, he says, in which are agreeably blended the caprice of chance and the sterling force of intellect.

'You will play of course, Grandby?' he says.

'Oh, rather—I will play!' cries Grandby, excitedly. 'Come along, Loftus—we will run a bank.'

But Loftus, to the surprise and disappointment of all, refuses point-blank to join.

'It is Sunday,' he says, quietly, in ex-

planation, and the glow of champagne upon his face deepens into one of sanctity as he speaks.

A yell of derision greets his speech, and Grandby's voice is plainly heard above the din congratulating him on his new-found piety.

Loftus stands quite unmoved.

'It may be a foolish prejudice on my part,' he says, modestly, 'but it is one which I cannot overcome. I was brought up in a highly religious atmosphere, and it is extremely hard to eradicate impressions received in childhood!'

'Oh! Come on—don't waste time with your chaff!' laughs Bramley. 'To the card-room.'

'But I can assure you that I am in earnest,' says Loftus, firmly. 'I distinctly refuse to play cards on Sunday—it is a very wicked thing to do—my mother told me so. And, what is more, I shall feel extremely hurt if any guest of mine should do so.'

'None of your rot, Loftus!' says Bramley. 'Come on, and don't play the fool.'

'Yes, come on, old chap,' says Grandby.

'You do not seem to understand me

quite,' says Loftus, quietly. 'I am not joking, but thoroughly in earnest. I say that I will not play, and I say that I shall feel extremely hurt—insulted even—if any guest of mine plays against my wish.'

'You have played for the last nine Sundays,' says Bramley, sulkily, perceiving now the true motive of Loftus' resistance.

'And for that I am to blame,' returns Loftus, mildly. 'Because one has done wrong once is no reason why one should continue in the paths of wickedness. I am sorry to make myself disagreeable, Grandby, old chap, but I do hope that you will accede to my request.'

'But, Loftus, this is really too absurd,' says Grandby; and it is ridiculous to attempt to conceal the fact that his voice is decidedly thick and indistinct. 'I really do not see your right to dictate to me like this.'

'My dear old chap, I have no right whatever—neither am I dictating to you—I am merely asking it as a favour.'

'Well—if you put it in that way, of course there is no other course open to me

but to comply,' says Grandby, in an injured tone. 'But I must protest . . .'

'Wait a moment!' interposes Bramley, suddenly. 'Our pious friend, there, has forgotten one little fact. It is past twelve, and therefore it is Monday.'

'It makes no difference,' answers Loftus, with a ring of pathetic sadness in his tones, as though pained to the quick at such a quibble. 'Can the influence of the blessed sabbath be dissipated in a moment by the mere striking of a clock? No—assuredly not! To me it is still Sunday, just as this time yesterday was Saturday, and to me it will continue Sunday till the morning dawn appears. Surely it is not too much to expect of a human being—to forego all mundane pleasures for one complete twenty-four hours in the week.'

He speaks so solemnly, and there is such a ring of genuine earnestness in his tones, that Grandby in his muddled state of mind is mightily impressed.

'You really mean it?' he asks, doubtfully.

'I really mean it.'

'You are positively in earnest?'

'I am positively in earnest.'

'Then of course, old chap, I will not play. I am awfully sorry to disappoint you,' he adds, turning towards the little group of discomfited faces. 'But I feel bound to show my host some little consideration. I must come and play another night.'

A murmur of discontent arises, and several ejaculations of an uncomplimentary character are hurled at the head of the pious Loftus. But that individual is in no way concerned thereat. Smiling benignly at their angry glances, he links his arm in Grandby's and leads him away.

'You have spoiled my evening, Loftus,' says Grandby, in an injured tone.

'I am so sorry, old chap,' murmurs Loftus, sympathetically. 'It may be foolish of me, but I cannot help feeling strongly on this subject. If you really want a game, come to-morrow, and the next day, and all through the week. I shall be happy to have you as my guest. You know, one must draw the line somewhere, however base may be one's inclinations, and card-playing on Sunday—*card-playing on Sunday*,' he repeats, holding up

his hands in virtuous horror, 'why—it is positively awful!'

'Well, since I can't play, I think that I had better go home,' says Grandby.

'Yes—perhaps you had,' replied Loftus, placidly; adding, in a paternal tone, 'and perhaps it would be as well if I accompanied you.'

But, to this proposition, Grandby gives the most indignant of refusals.

'The idea!' he cries, contemptuously. 'To hear you speak, one would think that I had had too much to drink.'

'A man can never have *too* much to drink,' replies Loftus, impressively. 'Unfortunately, however, it sometimes happens that his physical constitution is so imperfect as to prevent him from drinking for ever without feeling the effects. To cast a doubt on *your* sobriety would be the very last thing that I should think of doing. Why—you are as sober as a judge.'

'I am!' replies Grandby, with simple confidence.

'Therefore I will not press my company on you, since it is distasteful to you. So good-night, old chap! You know the

road—straight up past the church, turning at the post-office. Good-night.'

'Good-night,' says Grandby, cheerfully, 'see you to-morrow, old chappie;' and he walks off with, it must be confessed, rather uncertain steps for a man who has just professed to being as sober as a judge.

The mist has totally disappeared, and the whole hill has emerged from its covering of cloud, and is lying bathed in the soft, silvery light of the half-crescent moon. Grandby pursues his way slowly up the hill. He is feeling unmistakably jolly, but, in spite of the quickness of his circulation, his legs refuse to make very rapid progress. To his great surprise they appear very weak and shaky, and at times they seem inclined to give way altogether under him. He never remembers them to have so conducted themselves before, and he mildly expostulates with them on their very eccentric behaviour.

Suddenly, as he is thus objurgating his nether limbs, the figure of a woman, with face and neck completely enveloped in a shawl of some dark material, appears coming down the hill towards him. This sudden apparition causes him to totally forget

the vagaries of his legs, and he looks eagerly towards her. In the soft moonlight it seems to him as though she were anxious for concealment. Her hurried mode of progression and the peculiar manner in which she has hidden her face from view seem to bespeak some mystery, and in his present exalted state of mind he is seized with a burning desire to elucidate the same. So he stands in the middle of the road, awaiting her approach.

As she advances, it strikes him that he recognises her walk, but as to whom she resembles he cannot for the life of him remember. Hurrying along, with her eyes on the ground, she does not perceive him until she is within some fifteen paces of him. Then, through the folds of her cloak, she sees him, and, with a sudden cry of terror, she breaks into a run and rushes past him. In a moment it flashes across his mind who it is that she so closely resembles—he feels ready to swear that the fleeing figure is that of Diana Forsdyke.

Filled with astonishment he turns round to pursue her, but before he has gone ten paces, alas! those treacherous legs of his

give way, and he falls heavily to the ground. Dazed and bewildered by the suddenness of the fall, he slowly rises. To his great amazement the figure has entirely disappeared. He looks around him in perplexity, but there is not a trace of her to be seen. He passes his hand before his eyes and gives a heavy sigh.

'This won't do, Frank Grandby,' he says, reprovingly. 'It strikes me rather forcibly that you are making a bit of an ass of yourself. The best thing that you can do under the circumstances is to retire home and hide your diminished head between the sheets;' with which piece of salutary advice he turns round and walks slowly off in the direction of Banbury's Hotel.

CHAPTER III.

LOFTUS IS TREATED TO A MIDNIGHT PERFORMANCE.

LOFTUS stands for a moment or two in the verandah after bidding his friend good-night, watching him toiling somewhat laboriously up the little path leading on to the main road above. Then he turns away with a smile upon his face.

'I wonder what the deuce is up with him to-night,' he mutters. 'Evidently something is preying on his mind. I have a most strong conviction that the great platonic friendship has bust up. Oh! good Lord—just to think that a young chap *could* be so green as to believe in such a gross impossibility!'

This thought is too much for his gravity, and he leans against the wood-work of the

verandah and bursts into a hearty roar of laughter.

'A—Great—Platonic—Friendship!' he says, pronouncing the words separately, so as to emphasise the humour of the idea. 'And with Diana Forsdyke of all people in the world! Why—one might just as well lock up in a room together Solomon and Mrs. Potiphar, and expect them to talk about the weather! Oh! flay me alive with a blunt razor, if I have ever heard anything so rich before!

'Now, I wonder what her game really is,' he muses, gazing abstractedly across the giant ravine separating the Doonga Range from the opposite line of hills, the rugged peaks of which are now all bathed in the spectral light of the moon. 'I must confess that I am curious on this point. It is some years now since I have had the opportunity of studying her ladyship, but I am not likely to forget the last time we met. Poor old Charlie! But for her, he might still have been with us now. She is an unfathomable little demon, and that she is up to some devilry or other I am quite convinced. She resembles Ahab's wife in being a darned bad lot. However,

I will keep a corner of my eye upon her movements, and see that that young chap comes to no radical harm. He is strangely like poor Adelaide at times!'

Loftus turns round and saunters to the club, and, as though ashamed of having given way to tender memories of the past, he swears energetically at a waiter, and orders a whisky-peg.

'Bring it to the card-room, you swine,' he cries majestically, and he walks off in that direction.

It is one o'clock as he enters the room, and the game is in full swing. With flushed excited faces, about a dozen young blades are sitting round the table, the atmosphere of the room redolent of spirits and tobacco. There is a distinct dearth of coin to be seen upon the cloth, but the profusion of scraps of paper collected at each man's elbow plainly shows that no mean amount of money has changed hands during the last hour. It is so easy to gamble high, and to imagine oneself a millionaire, when bank-notes of a fabulous value can be created by the mere scratching of a pen!

His entry is the signal for a burst of

good-humoured chaff. Bramley, who is engaged in scribbling off with airy nonchalance a sum, exceeding two months' pay, looks up and scowls.

'Your piety is not long-lived,' he says, with a contemptuous sneer. 'Has young Grandby's nurse come to fetch him home?'

'Grandby has gone home,' answers Loftus, quietly. 'You need not attempt to be sarcastic, Bramley, for I am quite sure that the majority here will agree that I acted rightly. Grandby is one of the very best chaps in the world, and I was not going to allow him to be brought here to play for the high stakes which we patronise, when he was not in a fit state to judge for himself.'

'Bosh!' says Bramley, contemptuously. 'He was nothing of the sort. The fellow expressed his willingness to join, and I consider that your interference was confoundedly mean.'

'Your considerations on any subject whatever are quite immaterial to me,' says Loftus, coolly, taking his seat. 'If Grandby really wants to play, let him come to-morrow and the next day, and as

many other days as he likes—I am sure I shall be delighted to have him for a guest. But knowing as I do that he is not particularly well off, and that also, when sober, he never touches a card, I consider that it was my bounden duty to act in the way I did. I am only surprised, Bramley, that you do not see the matter in the same light. As a gentleman and friend, I could not have acted otherwise.'

A murmur of cordial approval greets his words. Bramley takes up the pack, and begins to shuffle nervously. He sees that he is alone in his opinion, and to tell the truth, he holds Loftus in mortal dread, both on account of his strength of will and the immense influence, that he possesses over the inmates of the club, and also on account of several pecuniary transactions that have passed between them, which as yet have not been completed to the satisfaction of both parties; so he wisely does not attempt to retort, and the matter drops.

In another moment, the game has commenced with renewed vigour.

'Gentlemen,' says Loftus, 'I am going to play for half-an-hour. Precisely at half-

past one I leave the table. What is in the pool?'

'Three hundred rupees.'

'Three hundred rupees—that is certainly a little stiff! However, I am going to try a new dodge to-night. I intend to play every time, whatever my hand, and whatever the pool. Round games become so infernally monotonous if one cannot contrive to introduce now and then a tinge of originality into the play.'

Loftus is true to his word; every deal, without a single break, he either takes miss or plays his own hand. In reality, this night his luck is highly favourable to him, but no luck, however favourable, could withstand such a reckless mode of play. At half-past one he rises, and at his request his I O U's are counted. The aggregate amount is close on seventeen hundred rupees. The scraps of paper in his own possession value about three hundred, so he rises a loser of fourteen hundred rupees, or something short of one hundred and twenty pounds.

He gives a little whistle on hearing the amount.

'The new dodge is certainly not paying,'

he says, walking towards the door. 'I should not advise you chaps to try it. Good-night, and God bless you all!'

Outside the door he puts his finger to his nose and chuckles, and then he walks down the stairs in a state of huge delight.

'That makes us quits,' he says, referring to his recent losses. 'Perhaps my paternal solicitude for young Grandby's welfare *did* seem rather shabby in their eyes.'

He walks down to his room and arouses his servant, who is asleep outside the door in the verandah. He then changes his coat for a gorgeous smoking-jacket, and having poked the fire, lighted a cigar, and helped himself to a whisky-peg, he dismisses his servant for the night, and seats himself down in a comfortable arm-chair.

Had one had the curiosity to examine the wine-book the next morning one would have found the following items placed to the account of 'The Honourable Vernon Loftus'—three quarts of champagne, two glasses of sherry, six glasses of madeira, three yellow chartreuse, one curaçoa, two kümmel, and eleven whisky-pegs—and yet, as he sits by his fire at half-past one in

the morning, his hand is as steady and his brain is as clear as though he had contented himself during the day with a modest quart of beer. Within the precincts of the club he bore the enviable reputation of being able to drink any three men consecutively under the table without turning a hair. As long as he remained calm and collected, and did not purposely excite himself, no amount of strong liquor seemed to have the least effect upon him —and it was to this fact that he owed his proud position of dictator to the club circle. The *habitués* of that establishment might sneer at erudition, military and scientific, might even hold in utter contempt all accomplishments of a social order, but none of them could resist the solid force of such a strong head as was possessed by Loftus, and they one and all bowed down to him and worshipped him as a being in every possible way superior to his fellow-creatures!

Loftus sits in rapturous enjoyment of his cigar. He is a gentleman not at any time addicted to much deep thought, and at the present moment his mind is in a state of perfect vacuum. A delicious, dreamy sense

of indolence steals across him, and he half-closes his eyes and smiles pleasantly into space.

Suddenly he is roused by the noise of footsteps in the verandah outside, and then the handle of his door is softly turned and a figure completely enveloped in a shawl of dark material hastily enters his room. He starts hurriedly to his feet. The figure closes the door, and throwing back her shawl stands before him in the person of Miss Diana Forsdyke!

'Miss Forsdyke!—Is it possible?' he exclaims, literally starting back in his astonishment.

She looks hastily round the room, glancing sharply into every corner and into the room beyond. Her cheeks are highly flushed and there is a wild sparkle of excitement gleaming from her lovely eyes.

'Am I safe?' she says, in an agitated whisper. 'Is there any fear of my being discovered here?'

In answer to her question, he walks to the door and turns the key.

'Miss Forsdyke,' he repeats, leaning with his back against the door, still unable to

believe his senses. 'What in the name of wonder brings you here?'

'Am I safe?' she whispers. 'Are you certain that no one can come in?'

'I am quite certain!' he answers. 'No one can possibly come in. Won't you take a seat? May I enquire the reason for this honour? Can I be of service to you in any way?'

By this time he has completely recovered his customary *sang-froid*, and he looks towards her, as he politely motions her to a chair, with a half smile upon his lips, experiencing a thrill of the most pleasurable excitement. This unexpected midnight visit smacks strongly of the nature of an adventure of a startling character, and it is consequently seized on with avidity by this *blasé* individual. It is something distinctly out of the common—something exciting—something exceedingly agreeable to his jaded palate!

She throws herself wearily into a chair, and he seats himself opposite to her, waiting expectantly for her to speak. She pushes her hat off her head, and a wealth of red-gold hair falls caressingly around

her *mignonne* face. Her heightened colour and sparkling eyes lend an additional attraction to her dazzling beauty, and he sits watching her with a mingled sense of admiration and enjoyment. What can she want? What on earth can be her motive for infringing all the laws of propriety by paying him this nocturnal visit?

'May I venture to inquire . . .' he begins, politely—but, before he can conclude his sentence, she has risen, and in another moment, with a sudden movement, she has thrown herself down before him at his feet.

'Spare me, Mr. Loftus!' she cries, with a gesture of passionate entreaty. 'Have pity on me—spare me! You have me in your power, and you can crush me with a word.'

He looks down at her with a glance of the utmost bewilderment. Has the girl gone mad, or what in the name of Heaven does she mean?

The situation has become peculiarly exciting; he raises his hand to his heart, and, to his intense delight, he discovers that it is beating with a most extraordi-

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nary and most unusual energy—in a way such as he does not remember it to have done for years.

He bends over her and attempts to raise her up.

'My very dear Miss Forsdyke,' he says, speaking as calmly as he can under the circumstances. 'I cannot permit you to kneel thus at my feet. You must *really* rise and seat yourself quietly in that chair. At present you are excited—seat yourself down and rest a moment or two, and recover your composure.'

With a gesture of impatience she repulses his proffer of assistance.

'Ah, listen to me!' she cries. 'I come to you humbled, crushed, bowed down to the very dust, to supplicate at your feet for clemency . . .'

He hastily interrupts her.

'Miss Forsdyke,' he says, earnestly, and he feels his heart actually thumping against his waistcoat, 'I really must refuse to listen to another word unless you consent to rise from off the ground. It is not right that I should allow . . .'

'Right!' she cries, in tones of passionate despair. 'Why do you talk to me

of *right?* How can there be a question of *right* between you and me? Am I not completely in your power? Alas! the slave can claim no right against his master.'

'Hush!' he says, bending down towards her. 'Whatever I may know of your past life, the fact still remains that you are a woman, and as such, as a gentleman, it would not be right for me to allow you to remain in this debased position. I must once again request you to rise.'

'Not till you have promised to show me pity,' she cries, raising her dead-pale face to meet his eyes. 'You are in the possession of the secret of my life. Besides my father, you and you alone are aware of the sin that I committed three years ago. You and you alone have the power of ruining me for ever—of blasting my good name and all my future prospects.'

She breaks into a torrent of tears.

'Ah, Mr. Loftus!' she cries, in broken accents of despair, 'promise me what I ask —promise me—swear to me—never to divulge my secret to any living mortal soul!'

He sits gazing at her in perplexity, trying hard to fathom the motive of her appeal. It is true that he is in possession of her secret, but then he has been so for the last three years, and she, of course, has been cognisant of the fact. Why, then, should she suddenly take upon herself to steal to him at midnight, and attempt to extort from him a lasting promise of secrecy? Knowing well, as he does, the character of the girl before him, he feels convinced that she must have some vital reason for this stolen visit in the dead of night, and so, in consequence, he adopts a cautious reserve, resolving to promise nothing until he has discovered it. Vernon Loftus is much too astute an individual to be imposed upon by the tears and sobbings of a pretty girl!

'Why should you doubt me now, Miss Forsdyke?' he says, earnestly. 'Have I not kept your secret faithfully for three whole years? Why, then, should you suddenly come to me like this, creeping in at the dead of night? Has anything lately made you suspect that I am ever likely to betray you?'

'Why do I come like this?' she repeats,

sadly. 'Ah, Mr. Loftus, you may well ask me that! Why, then, do you avoid me on all occasions when we meet? Do you think that I have not noticed it? Do you think that a sensitive nature like mine could have remained unconscious of your studied intention to shun my society?'

'But you are really labouring under a delusion, dear Miss Forsdyke,' he says, in great surprise. 'When have I ever avoided you? As far as I can remember, I have never met you save at the dance given here last month, and surely your memory can recall what happened then.'

'Yes—you were indeed good and kind to me on that occasion,' she says, in the same sad tones. 'When I first saw you in the room, I thought that I should have fainted—your face recalled to me all the terrible memories of the past. And then you came and told me that my secret was safe in your keeping, and that I had nothing to fear from you, and my agony of mind was partially set at rest. But since then I have met you several times—at the tennis-courts and in the assembly-rooms, and once or twice in the gardens of the hotel, where you had come to visit Mr.

Grandby, and each time you turned away and pretended not to see me. How could I think otherwise than that you wished to avoid me?'

'Well, I can assure you that you are mistaken,' he says, vainly trying to recall the purely fictitious circumstances to which she refers. 'I can swear on my honour as a gentleman that I have never intentionally avoided you.'

'I am very glad to hear you say so,' she answers, wearily. 'I had thought that perhaps you hated me for the part I played three years ago. But ah! Mr. Loftus, if you only knew what I have suffered since, you would not hate me—you would pity me from the bottom of your heart. Never a day passes without my seeing before me that blood-stained bed, with the figure lying upon it—slowly—slowly—dying!'

She covers her face with her hands as though to obliterate the sight, and a convulsive shudder runs through her prostrate form.

'Ah, God!' she cries, 'I have suffered—I have cruelly suffered since. Do not three long weary years of repentance and

remorse count for something in this granite world? Can I never atone for the sin that I committed in my youth? Must the memory of that awful time haunt me like a nightmare's spectre to my dying day?'

'My dear Miss Forsdyke,' he says, gently, 'you pain me excessively by giving way so terribly to your grief. That miserable affair is past and gone, and nothing that we can do can ever bring poor Charlie back to life. You should not allow yourself to brood too much over that tragic incident. Conscious of your repentance, you should forget it, and strive to atone by leading a better life.'

Strange words to proceed from the mouth of such a man as Loftus! Ay—strange indeed! But what man is there in existence who has not an inner self, in all ways distinct from his outward bearing?

'How can you speak to me so kindly?' she cries, with a stifled sob, burying her face in her hands against her knees. 'Of what avail are years of remorse and suffering? Shall I not be to my dying day a lost fallen wretch—dishonoured—tainted—and—and a murderess?'

Her voice dies out in a despairing gasp, and in another moment her body is shaken with a convulsive sobbing.

'Spare me!' she cries. 'You and you alone are aware of my guilty secret. How can I lead a better life—how can I ever hope for happiness, when I know that with a word you can blast my name for ever?'

'Why should you doubt me?' he says, again, firm in his resolve not to yield before he has penetrated the real motive of her present strange behaviour. 'You must know me better than to think that I should wilfully spread reports to ruin you. What has caused you to suspect my honour in this sudden manner? I can assure you that I have never mentioned your name in connection with that affair to any single living soul. Why should you suspect me of such a thing?'

For some moments there is silence. She remains at his feet, with her face buried in her hands, gently weeping; and he, in spite of his firm conviction that she is merely acting a part—that her tears and passionate entreaties are affected for a

purpose—cannot prevent himself from feeling strangely moved by the peculiarity of the situation. Becoming conscious of this sudden dawn of tenderness towards her, he resolutely steels his heart against her, resolving, come what may, to make her no rash promises until he has discovered the real motive underlying her passionate supplications.

He knows her well—three years before he had had ample opportunity for studying her real character—and he is fully aware that she would never humble herself in the way which she is now doing, unless there was some adequate reason for doing so; but what that reason is he is at a loss to imagine. He sits there, gazing down in bewilderment at the mass of red-warm hair lying on his lap, asking himself whether it is reality, or merely a vivid dream, in vain attempting to find some plausible solution to the mystery. But none comes; the moments creep slowly by, and still they remain in the same position, the only sound which breaks the oppressive silence of the room being the stifled sobbings of the beseeching girl.

Gradually her sobs grow less, and the burst of agitation to which she has given vent dies out. A long, low sigh issues from her lips, followed by a sudden shiver, which trembles through her body; and then there is a perfect silence in the room. Rigid and immovable, with her head resting on his knees, she remains there, prostrated at his feet.

Loftus sits regarding her with a half-comical expression on his clever face. In spite of the tragic character of the situation, he cannot prevent himself from seeing that it also bears a comic aspect. His sense of humour is too strongly developed for him to avoid perceiving that his position is peculiarly grotesque. Vernon Loftus, the gay Lothario, the eminent lady-killer, the world-famed tippler, alone in the dead of night with a lovely girl lying at his feet dissolved in tears!

Even now he can hardly believe his senses as he looks at that tangled mass of dark-gold hair. What is going to happen next? He is so unusually excited by the novelty of the occurrence that he finds himself totally unable to collect his thoughts coherently, so he sits there, with

no intention of uttering a syllable, calmly awaiting the development of the drama at his feet.

He wonders abstractedly to himself how long she means to lie in that position. The silence is really becoming most embarrassing, but he makes no effort to break it, for he is resolved that the girl who has come to him so mysteriously shall explain her conduct, and he hopes to gain an inkling as to the real truth from the first words that issue from her lips. He looks despairingly towards the whisky-bottle; it is in the opposite corner of the room, far beyond his reach, and he dare not attempt to get it for fear of disturbing the head upon his knees. With that dear old decanter by his side—oh! how he loves its familiar cut-glass configuration—he feels that the silence might continue for a week without his experiencing therefrom the least discomfort. But with it gazing tantalisingly in his face at three yards' distance, as though jeering at the gulf between them, he really begins to feel doubts as to whether——

His reverie is broken by Miss Forsdyke's voice.

'Mr. Loftus,' she murmurs, disclosing her pale face to view, 'is it too much for me to ask? Do you refuse to promise me what I wish?'

'My dear Miss Forsdyke,' he says, turning away his head with reluctance from the whisky-bottle, which has now assumed a grin of fiendish satisfaction to his tortured vision, and looking fixedly down upon her, 'you must forgive me if I venture to demand some explanation of your sudden visit here to-night. You say that your honour is in my keeping, and you only speak the truth—with one word I could ruin your prospects in life for ever. But so it has been for the last three years, and you have been fully aware of the fact. Now, never during the course of these three years have I ever given you the slightest cause for the least suspicion of a desire on my part to disclose your painful secret. As I told you just now, I have never mentioned the fact to a single living soul. Last month, on the occasion of our meeting at the dance, I told you that you had nothing to fear, that your secret was safe with me—that, in fact, I had determined to completely forget the incident,

and that I should never refer to it again, however often we might meet. And, you may remember, you thanked me profusely for what you were good enough to call my great kindness, expressing yourself perfectly happy and contented. How is it, then, that you appear here to-night, risking your *present* reputation by the strangeness of your behaviour? From what you say, I conclude that you doubt my sense of honour —it seems to me that you fear lest I should spread reports concerning you. You must pardon me speaking in this cool, collected manner. I have no wish to be severe, but I must really insist on your telling me the true motive of your request. What cause have I given you for suspicion?'

'I will tell you!' she cries, fiercely, suddenly throwing back her head, and exposing her pale, tear-stained face to view. 'I was a fool not to have known you better than to have supposed, that you would ever be influenced by a suffering woman's prayer. Mr. Loftus—you are hard and cruel—in reality, you hold me in abhorrence for what I did three years before—I know it—I know it well! In your heart,

you still blame me for that terrible occurrence. You take no account of the agonies of remorse that I have suffered—you refuse to see that it was accidental—that it was merely the thoughtless whim of a capricious girl—you merely see in me the woman who killed your friend—and you hate me with an undying hate! I see it in your eyes—in your every glance—I feel it when you speak—I—ah! my God!—what am I saying?'

In another moment, she is leaning forward, clinging to his arm.

'Forgive me!' she cries, hoarsely, 'I must be mad to speak like this—sometimes I think that I am really mad—I have so much to bear! You are my friend—my best of friends—I know it! Say, Mr. Loftus—are you not my friend? God help me, if you ever declare yourself my enemy!'

Her voice dies out in a wail of pathetic sadness, and her head falls again upon his knees. But Loftus does not allow himself to be impressed. He looks down at her coldly, and there is a suspicion of a cynical smile playing about the corners of his mouth. He is convinced that it is a

magnificent piece of acting, and nothing more. Conquering his growing aversion towards her, he answers her in an affected tone of tenderness.

'You certainly wrong me by your accusation, Miss Forsdyke. I am pained and surprised that you should attribute to me such unworthy feelings. Surely my silence for these last three years must prove to you that I am at heart your friend. Instead of hating you, as you seem to imagine I do, I pity you sincerely from the bottom of my heart, and I am ready now, as I have always been, to do you any service in my power. But surely you must admit that I am not asking too-much in requiring you to explain your motive. You must see that your very request is an imputation against my sense of honour. Conscious as I am in my integrity, I wish you to explain what has given rise to your suspicions.'

'Then, I will tell you,' she cries, hurriedly, looking him in the face. 'Perhaps you may have heard from Mr. Grandby something of our intimacy. Perhaps he may have told you that we have formed a great, platonic friendship . . .'

A sudden flash of light breaks upon the confusion in his brain—in a moment he understands the reason of her midnight visit.

'Yes—I have heard of that holy institution,' he says, interrupting her with a short laugh. 'Frank Grandby has himself explained to me the nature of his affection for you. May I venture to ask, Miss Forsdyke, whether your love for him is equally as pure?'

'It is—it is!' she cries, hastily, with a heightened colour, turning away her head, unable to meet his cold, penetrating gaze. 'I love him as a brother—and only as a brother! And oh!—Mr. Loftus, I cannot bear to give him up. He is so good and kind to me, so loving and affectionate,—by his gentle influence he has made another being of me—raised me from despondency to a sense of perfect gladness—made all the world assume a different colour—given me a new zest in existence! And you, and you alone, can mar this new-born happiness! Oh! spare me—have pity on me—promise never to confide to him the story of my shame!'

'What a really wonderful thing a platonic

friendship must be!' says Loftus, calmly. 'Do you really mean to tell me that it has done all that for you? Raised you from despondency to a sense of perfect gladness. You must really allow me to congratulate you, my dear Miss Forsdyke, on having discovered such a priceless tonic for despair. Fancy that now—and I—fool that I was—have all along never believed in such a state of intercourse! Ah! how true it is we live and learn.'

He looks piously up to the ceiling, gravely nodding his head from side to side. She starts to her feet with a sudden cry, as though stung by a poisonous snake, and a look of fierce anger overcasts the perfect loveliness of her face.

'You mock me!' she cries, between her teeth, 'you insult me here, when I am completely at your mercy! Mr. Loftus, how dare you descend to such low and cowardly behaviour?'

Like a tragic empress—Semiramis of old—she stands before him, her whole figure trembling with the violence of her passion. A vivid flush of colour illumines the dazzling beauty of her face, darts of fire seem to shoot from the depths of those lovely

eyes which can at will appear so soft and lovable, her whole frame is stiff and rigid, with one arm outstretched as though in denunciation of his infamy.

He looks at the beautiful fury standing thus before him with a glance of admiration. And then he smiles placidly, and calmly points towards a chair.

'Sit down, Miss Forsdyke,' he says, coolly. 'Pray compose yourself—my nerves really cannot stand such violent agitation.'

In a moment the rigidity of her posture is relaxed. She takes a step towards him, looking as beautiful as night in the intensity of her anger, and hisses between her teeth,

'How dare you so insult me? Do you dare to doubt my word when I tell you that my love for Frank is purely sisterly?'

'I implore you to be calm,' he says, composedly. 'You really astonish me, Miss Forsdyke, with your versatility of genius. A moment ago you were lying at my feet, playing the *rôle* of the suppliant girl—now you are standing before me in high tragedy—and 'pon my word, without

wishing to flatter you, you really do it admirably.'

He bends his head to one side closes one eye, and takes a critical survey of her upright figure.

'What do you mean?' she whispers, with a sudden gasp.

'I mean this,' he says, calmly, walking to the table and pouring himself out a whisky-peg, 'for this last hour you have been acting a part—and—I—know it! All your tears and sighs and supplications have been false—as false as your true character—and they have fallen on deaf ears. You should have known me better, Miss Forsdyke, than to have thought that I could be taken in by such stage effects. I am too old a hand for that—I am made of stronger stuff than is poor Frank Grandby. Have a whisky-p-p-p—I mean, I—I beg your pardon—may I offer you any refreshment?'

She turns a deadly white, and moves hurriedly towards the door. He gently interposes, and takes her by the arm, and leads her passively back to the centre of the room.

'Listen to me, Miss Forsdyke,' he says, slowly. 'You have taken a liking to

young Grandby—you are partial to taking likings to young men of pleasant persons. Whether your affection for him is platonic or not is immaterial to me. I do not care a rap about the matter. Your object in coming here to-night was to extort a promise from me never to divulge your secret—you were afraid that I should tell Frank Grandby, and that you would consequently lose his very fascinating society. Am I not right?'

She makes no answer. Her eyes are staring fixedly towards him with an expression of mute horror, as though fascinated by his glance and unable to turn away, and her face is totally devoid of every trace of colour.

'I see from your expression that I am right,' he says, in the same quiet tones. 'Now, Miss Forsdyke, considering how well we are acquainted with each other's peculiarities, would it not have been more sensible on your part to have come boldly to me and told me what you wanted, instead of wasting so much time in senseless tears and protestations? You surely could not have believed for one moment that I would be taken in by your dramatic

exhibition. If you did, I feel deeply hurt at the poor opinion you have of me.'

Still no answer! Still the same half-scared, cowed, deadly-white expression on her face!

'You see, we have wasted such a lot of time in arriving at your meaning. You came at half-past one—it is now nearly half-past two. A whole hour gone, when three minutes would have been amply sufficient. Partial as I am to theatrical display, I really prefer to take it a little earlier in the evening than two a.m. Everything in its proper time, you know, Miss Forsdyke—regularity is the root of all happiness to a well-constituted mind. And now for my reply. I can safely promise you not to interfere in any way with your pretty little game. You may love the boy as a mother, sister, aunt, or in any way you please; you may flirt with him and kiss him, hang about his neck, brush his hair or mend his socks, or—in fact, do anything you like. Always having made it a point in life never to spoil other people's sport, I am not going to change my usual custom on this particular occasion. Do with him as

you please—he is very fresh and young, and I have no doubt that you will have great fun—and believe me that, as long as you do the boy no harm, I shall never stir a finger in the pie.'

'What do you mean by *harm?*' she whispers, hoarsely, retreating backwards towards the door.

'By *harm?*' he says, with an airy laugh. 'Oh! I need not explain to *you* what I mean—were I talking with the Archbishop of Canterbury, probably I should have to descend to explanation, for most likely we should disagree as to the meaning of the word—but with *you* it is quite different! Ask your extremely elastic conscience, and I do not doubt that you will get an answer. What—are you really going? Good-night—don't catch cold—pleasant dreams and sweet repose—you are *sure* you will not take a—a—a—something warm—the night is very cold, remember—good-night!'

He follows her to the doorway and watches her depart. She stands for a moment in the moonlight—a dark grey figure against a silvery sky—and then she raises her clenched hand to heaven and turns round and disappears.

'Very—very pretty!' he says, composedly, walking back to his room. 'A powerful finale to a powerfully-acted drama! But, lord, I am too old a codger to be affected by such pasteboard scenes! By all that's holy! I think I will have another peg.'

CHAPTER IV.

WAHLVERWANDTSCHAFT.

A CLEVER Austrian, who, in the last few years, has been wasting his splendid natural abilities in attempting to demonstrate to the apathetic world around him that everything is nothing, though nothing is really something, has thus defined love—'a strange longing, incomprehensible even to itself, partly reverie, partly self-deception, reminiscences, self-application of what has been heard or read, combined with a sickly, sentimental morbid imagination, and partly sheer lunacy, emotional or melancholy insanity.'

This exhaustive and bitter definition of that passion which is popularly supposed to make the world turn round, expresses fairly accurately the feelings of Mr. Frank

Grandby towards Miss Diana Forsdyke on awakening the next morning after his festive evening at the club. Not having had the pleasure of reading the writings of our Teutonic friend quoted above, he is unable to express his feelings in such a concise and polished phraseology, but he is none the less aware that his love for Diana is of a kind hitherto totally unsuspected, with nothing approaching to calm, platonic affection in its composition.

Lying in bed, feeling strangely disinclined to rise, with the sun's rays peeping through the blind, he wonders to himself how it has been possible for him to have continued so long in a placid state of self-deception.

It was on the evening of the twenty-first of August, at the club dance, that he was first imbued with the idea of forming a great, platonic friendship, and from that date up to yesterday—a matter of three weeks—he has been firmly impressed with the purely fraternal character of his affection. Suddenly, under the influence of a great excitement, the scales have fallen from his eyes, and, to his great surprise and shame, he has discovered that his love, instead

of being spiritual, is grossly carnal. He loves her with the love of a strong-passioned man, thirsting for a mate—with a love that can only be satisfied with the possession of the object of his attachment. Oh! fool that he has been, to have been so absurdly blind—coward that he is to have induced a young girl under false pretences into a secret intimacy!

What is he to do? That is the question which occupies his mind as he lies in bed on this bright September morning. In what way can he repair the wrong that he has done the girl?

One fact becomes self-evident—he must openly confess his sin, and then separate from her for ever. But can he do this? Is his strength of mind sufficient to allow him to voluntarily put out of his life a being who has become so dear to him? A damp sweat breaks out upon his forehead, and he becomes conscious of a sudden tightening about the region of the heart as he asks himself the question.

'It cannot be,' a voice within him cries. 'Now that you know the real state of your feelings, she has become a thousand times more dear to you than she was before.

How can you voluntarily yield her up? She is yours, and yours alone, by the right of the power of your love.'

He turns himself over with a movement of despair.

'But you must!'—and now it is the sober voice of conscience that addresses him. 'You have inveigled her into an intimate relationship by pretending to bear towards her a pure, platonic feeling. That pretence on your part was a lie, and now that you are conscious of the lie, it is your bounden duty to give her up. Loving her in the way you do, you have no earthly right to her acquaintance. With your change of feelings, you have become another man, and you are no longer her brother-friend, but a total stranger. As you are honourable, you must leave her.'

'Yes, but it was totally unpremeditated on your part,' says the tempting promptings of his heart. 'Surely you were not to blame because, unconscious to yourself, your feelings towards her changed. You entered on the friendship strong in your integrity of purpose. You loved her, and you gained her love. Why, then, should

you give her up simply because the character of your love has changed? Though you no longer love her in a platonic way, still your intentions towards her are strictly honourable. In what way can you harm her by continuing your present intimacy on the same footing as before?'

'No, you were not to blame,' returns the mentor, conscience. 'You were thoroughly convinced of the purity of your love—your change of feelings came upon you imperceptibly. But this fact makes no difference to your bounden duty now. You can no longer meet her clandestinely in the recesses of a secluded wood. Honourable as may be your intentions, the flesh is weak, and never is it weaker than when influenced by the yearnings of a violent passion such as yours. Say—tell me truthfully, honestly, could you now hold her in your arms without injuring her, if not by deed, at least by thought?'

'No, no, no—I could not do it,' he hastily answers. 'It would be a too terrible temptation—I could not bear it—I should fall.'

'Exactly so,' returns the voice of conscience. 'You cannot wilfully deceive her

by affecting still a fraternal affection. You must do your duty and confess your fault, and there can be no doubt that your intimacy will cease. Her maiden modesty will never countenance its continuance. You must make up your mind to give her up. She can never be to you henceforth anything but a memory. As you value your honour, you must separate from her for ever. Take courage, and face the sacrifice with a bold front, for if you hesitate you fail, and you will be plunged into the bottomless pit of dishonour and lasting shame.'

And so the struggle continues in his brain, each solid argument brought forward by his conscience being met by some subtle sophistry issuing from the promptings of his inclination. With a decision rocking irresolutely backwards and forwards, like a barque upon the ocean, he lies upon his bed, pale with anxiety and doubt. At one moment he swears that nothing in the world will make him give her up, that his love is too strong to admit of such a sacrifice, that he could not live without her; and the next moment he is lying, trembling from the force of his agitation, taunting

himself for his cowardly weakness of mind. What shall he do? How can he bring himself to do his duty?

He loves her—he loves her passionately—he loves her with a love such as he has never known before—such as he, in his young experience, has never imagined to be possible in a human being. And he has made her believe that he loves her as a brother, and on the strength of this falsehood he has gained her friendship and her sister's love. What will she think of his guilty conduct? Will she shrink from him with utter loathing? Will she regard him to her dying day as a coward and a traitor?

He dare not ask himself the question; he dare not attempt to picture in his mind her look of contemptuous scorn; he dare not imagine to himself the aversion which she will feel towards him. It is too terrible a contemplation!

What would he not now give to be able to undo the entanglement which he with his own hands has tied in the last three weeks—to be able to look her in the face with a glance of placid unrecognition, not knowing and not known? What would

he not now give to have never met the girl?

He must nerve himself to the dreadful task before him, for he no now longer has a doubt as to what he ought to do—he must tell her plainly of his guilt; he must beg her to forgive him and forget him; and then he must say good-bye for ever, and leave her, never to meet again!

'Coward that I am!' he cries, starting up, under the influence of his agitation. 'I dare not tell her to her face the story of my sin! I dare not stand before her and watch that glorious face pale beneath the shock of shame that she will receive when she hears my cruel confession! I am not strong enough to undergo such agony. I will write to her and tell her all on paper —and that will save me the great torture of looking on her face again.'

Fearful lest he may again be seized with that fatal irresolution which has been his one great enemy in life, he jumps out of bed and seats himself as he is before his table, and, drawing his desk before him, commences to write with trembling hands the story of his shame.

It is no easy task to do; to deliberately

confess to one's own fault requires more than an ordinary amount of moral courage. But he does not hesitate; he feels that if he waits to weigh his words he will never succeed in finishing the letter. So he scribbles off with feverish haste sheet after sheet, numbering them and throwing them as they are completed loosely about the table.

It is a strange sight to see him sitting there in the cool morning air with dishevelled hair and flushed complexion, with his night-shirt opened at the neck, and with a look of fierce anxiety upon his face, pouring out the remorseful bitterness of his soul. He tells her unrestrainedly of his sin; he does not attempt to palliate his offence by dwelling on his own ignorance of the true nature of his feelings; he merely states the fact that he loves her passionately with a strong man's love, imploring her to try to find some forgiveness in her heart for the terrible weakness of which he has been guilty.

'Diana,' he writes, and there is more than a suspicion of moisture in his winning eyes, 'I love you—I love you fiercely, madly, passionately. Even now, when my heart seems

breaking at the thought of the shameful way in which I have betrayed you, I cannot resist the pleasure of dwelling on my love. Forgive me, darling—forgive my wild presumption—forgive my crime—forgive me for daring to write to you like this. I cannot help myself—I cannot deny myself the selfish gratification of confiding to you my passion. It rings in my head—in one long, endless refrain—I love you—I love you—I love you! I have been blind, mad, insane not to have recognised all along the true nature of my feeling, for, now that the truth has come upon me, I see that from the very first I have loved you in this way. We must part—we must never meet again—we must separate for ever! Ah! the agony of knowing that I shall never look you in the face again! Can you forgive me? Will a time ever come when you will again think of me in a kindly spirit? Or will the memory of my treachery rankle in your heart for ever? Will you always recall my name with shuddering contempt and scorn? I cannot tell—I dare not think—I am only conscious that the wrong I have done you is indeed past forgiveness. Ah! Diana—do not hate me—try

to think well of me and pity me; for, if ever a man wanted pity in this unhappy world, it is I.'

In spite of his haste and agitation, the composition which he hurriedly scribbles off is by no means a crude production. The gravity of the situation imbues him with a new force, and he is enabled to transcribe to paper his remorse and shame with a masterly precision which surprises him, for he is well aware that as a rule he is but a poor letter-writer. There is a ring of such genuine pathos, such heart-breaking sadness in his lines that the tears are falling freely from his eyes as he completes the task.

Without daring to read it through, for fear he should be dissatisfied with the result, and tear it up in consequence, he places it in an envelope and addresses it, and his hand trembles so as he writes the superscription that he hardly recognises his own hand-writing, as he looks with blurred eyes upon the beloved name.

And now comes a difficulty, which up till now he has not taken into consideration. How is the letter to be delivered?

He hastily calls his servant. It is im-

perative that she should receive the note at once; he cannot entrust it to the tedious process of the post—so he holds it out and explains to his servant what it is that he requires of him to do.

The Mohammedan enters eagerly, oriental-like, into what smacks of the nature of intrigue. A gleam of satisfaction spreads across his oily face as he listens to his master's agitated directions. He knows the miss-sahib well, he answers; he also, strangely enough, is acquainted with the miss-sahib's ayah, and he is certain that he will have no difficulty whatever in conveying the letter to its destination.

'Then take it,' cries Grandby, handing it to him. 'If you are successful, you shall have five rupees.'

The servant brings the palm of his hand to his forehead, and salaams in the oriental fashion. He will be successful, he says, and secret as the grave—and, hiding the letter in the folds of his turban, he turns and leaves the room.

As the door closes behind him, Grandby sinks wearily into a chair. He has completed his task manfully, but not until this moment does he become aware of the

terrible effort that it has been. A damp moisture breaks out upon his forehead, and he is seized with a sudden giddiness, which compels him to bury his face in his arms upon the table. His thoughts become confused, but he is conscious that it is his duty now to pack up and leave Doonga immediately—he must not stay another day in such dangerous propinquity to Miss Forsdyke. Whither shall he go? He does not know—he does not care—he feels incapable of thinking. All places are the same to him—in his present state of mind, he is indifferent to his future and to everything in life. He can only remember that he loves the girl, and that he has bidden her adieu for ever!

How long he remains in this position he does not know, but he is suddenly aroused by the door opening, followed by the stealthy tread of naked feet across the floor.

With a gesture of impatience he raises his pale, wearied face, to see his servant standing before him with a smile of satisfaction on his face. He mutely questions him as to the result of his mission—he has

not the heart to speak out aloud. He feels that nothing that the man may say can alleviate his present agony of mind.

The man salaams to the ground. Prefacing his remarks with the unnecessary statement that the sahib is his father and mother, and the honoured protector of the poor, he says that the letter has been delivered. The ayah had been in the verandah, waiting for her mistress to arise from bed, and he had beckoned to her to come to him beyond the corner of the house, and there he had confided to her the nature of his mission. She expressed herself ready to take the letter, provided that it was weighted with a silver coin—so he had given her a rupee, and she had left him, disappearing through the door-way into the miss-sahib's room. After waiting for over half-an-hour, the ayah had reappeared, and had placed in his hands a little note to be given to the sahib.

Up to this moment Grandby has listened to his servant's prosy recital with listless indifference, but now he springs up with an exclamation of great astonishment.

'What!—A letter!—Where is it? Give it to me—quick—quick!'

He snatches it from his servant's hands, and with trembling fingers tears it open. For some moments he is unable to decipher anything—in his intense agitation the letters seem to swim before his eyes. Then he reads it, and as he masters its contents he falls back, with a sudden cry, as pale as death.

This is what he reads :

'My love—my darling,

'I have suspected it all along. How can I blame you when I, too, have been guilty of the same terrible weakness? Meet me in the old place at four o'clock.

'D. F.'

CHAPTER V.

'LASCIATE OGNI SPERANZA.'

For some moments he is too agitated to speak or move; with a face devoid of every trace of colour, trembling in every limb, he sits in his chair, gazing blankly at the scrap of paper.

'How can I blame you when I, too, have been guilty of the same terrible weakness?'

What does she mean?—he whispers hoarsely to himself. Can it be the truth that she returns his love?

Awed by the strange pallor and agitation of his master, the servant cautiously approaches him, and draws attention to his person by a timid cough. At the sound, Grandby looks round quickly.

'What do you want?' he cries, sharply. 'What are you doing there?'

The servant salaams to the ground.

'Protector of the poor,' he says, 'it is ten o'clock. Does the sahib require that his hot water should be brought?' This simple question somewhat recalls his scattered senses. He springs hastily to his feet.

'Yes, bring it at once,' he says, 'and also some *chota hazari*.'

The servant leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

She loves him—she loves him—she loves him! He stands in the middle of the room, repeating these words to himself in a half-dazed manner, unable exactly to realise their true significance. Yes—she loves him—loves him with a love similar to that which he bears for her—loves him with the soft warm love of a gentle girl! Ah! pitiful fool that he has been! What freak of insanity could have ever induced him to believe in the possible existence of a great platonic friendship? Is it to be wondered at that Loftus—astutest of human beings—has laughed the idea to scorn?

She loves him! She, too, has been guilty of the same terrible weakness! She loves him! She, too, has been powerless to resist the force of their affinity! She loves him! She, too, has cast prudence to the winds, and has given him her love!

Ah! the fierce delight of a mutual passion. What can equal it on earth? When the soul of man, swooning away in the ecstasy of joy, seems to cast off its earthly shell, and soar upwards to the realms of vague unconsciousness!

He falls upon his knees beside the bed, and presses the letter passionately to his lips. She, too, has been guilty of the same terrible weakness! She loves him.

Presently he rises to his feet, and begins to busy himself with the toilette; that first burst of maddening joy has given away to the sense of a great calm.

The servant enters, bringing his hot water, and a tray of tea and toast, which he places upon the table; and then Grandby dismisses him, telling him for that morning he will dispense with his services and dress himself. He wishes to be alone with his own thoughts!

The man retires, lost in wonder at the

expression of such a strange desire on the part of his imperious master. Having done bearer's work to different officers for the last ten years, it has never entered into his calculations that the haughty Feringhi Sahib could dress himself without assistance from the humble native.

Grandby puts on his dressing-gown, pours himself out a cup of tea, and takes a nibble at the toast, thinking deeply all the time. What is to be the outcome of it all?

The question has entered on a new phase by this confession of her love. It is no longer a matter of remorse and self-reproach, for she, too, has been guilty of the same terrible weakness, and in consequence all question of injury done to her by him has been removed. His bitter self-accusation of having inveigled her into granting him her sisterly affection under false pretences has vanished into air, for she has confessed to loving him with the same strong love that he bears her. As far as injury is concerned, they are quits—in giving way to the tender feeling, they have both been equally culpable towards each other? In becoming thus aware that his

guilt is not in any way of such a magnitude, as he had at first imagined, a great weight is lifted off his mind, but still he cannot conceal from himself that his position is one of the most extreme awkwardness. He finds himself placed in a predicament of the gravest order.

He and a young girl, with whom he has lived for the last three weeks in a state of the closest intimacy, carried away by the intensity of their feelings for one another, have gradually drifted quite unconsciously from a calm fraternal affection into a state of fierce, ardent love, and they have mutually confessed the state of their hearts to one another. What in the usual state of affairs is the inevitable result of such a situation? To this query, there is only one reply—in the usual state of affairs the inevitable result of such a situation is matrimony, *pur et simple.*

Grandby, under the influence of the great calm which has fallen upon him subsequent to the violent shock of the discovery of Diana's love, clearly comprehends this fact, and it fills him with a sense of the gravest anxiety, for he knows that to him the thought of matrimony is impossible. In

spite of the intensity of his passion, his better sense is still clear enough to tell him that he is far too young to marry, that he is totally unfitted to undertake the guardian-ship of a fellow-creature, or to become the master of a household.

The time for marriage cannot be arbitrarily fixed by years—it is a matter of individual character. On some men at the early age of twenty, the cloak of married state falls suitably and gracefully; on others when they are twice the age, it has the effect of a masquerade. And all men, as they hope for happiness, should be more than careful in satisfying themselves as to the fit and cut before donning that solemn raiment, which when once put on can never be removed without recourse to the shears of death and sin. Let them patiently bide their time—wait till they are suited—go unclothed rather than badly-clothed—for it will be found that the sober course of of years will, as a rule, in time adapt all men to the contour of those folds.

But in Grandby's case, besides the consciousness of his unfitness, there is an insuperable objection destructive to his ever entertaining the thought of marriage. In

addition to his pay, he possesses merely an annuity of two hundred pounds a year left to him by his father at his death, and the state of his mother's income, he is fully aware, will not permit of her granting him any further allowance. How, then, is it possible for him to marry?

He does not argue on selfish grounds—his sense of honour merely tells him that it would not be right, whatever the force of his inclination and strength of his passion, to ask any young girl, bred in the lap of luxury and affluence, to share the penury of his home. This principle he has held for years, and now that the time has come to prove his strength of mind by putting it into force he does not shrink from the ordeal. On the contrary, the fierceness of his love intensifies rather than diminishes his high-minded sense of duty, for the thought of the future misery to which his marriage with her would bring her is too painful for contemplation.

It becomes clear to him that his duty is to say good-bye for ever. Loving her as he does, with the knowledge that she bears towards him a passion similar in intensity to his own, coupled with the fact that it is

impossible that he can ever stand towards her in any closer relationship than he does at present, he understands how imperative it is for him to leave her and never look upon her face again—and, as he arrives at this conclusion, the knowledge of all that he will lose by the execution of his resolve presents itself before him in all its hideous nudity, and he rises from the table and falls upon his knees beside his bed, a helpless, writhing figure, torn with a heart-corroding agony.

CHAPTER VI.

HIS PROMISED WIFE!

In the meanwhile Mrs. Stockton has not been idle. For the last two days she has been observed prowling about the house, lurking about the passages, listening at keyholes, sneaking round corners, and, in fact, conducting herself generally in a very peculiar manner for a lady of the nineteenth century.

Her strange mode of behaviour has been the subject of much comment amongst the ladies of the hotel, and, haunted by the recollection of that famous night when their fierce bravado had vanished into smoke, they are one and all seized with a vague, inexpressible fear, not knowing what to expect as the outcome of her stealthy movements.

More than one lady expresses her intention of leaving the hotel at once if Mrs. Stockton continues to behave in such a peculiar way, and many of them secretly betake themselves to the manager's room and with pretty pleading implore him to effect her immediate removal. But the manager refuses to stir a finger in the matter. He himself is certainly of an opinion that the presence of Mrs. Stockton is a discredit to the establishment, and nothing, he says, would give him greater pleasure than to see her take her departure, but—and here he stammers, and adopts an insinuating smile—unfortunately for the good name of the house, he himself has been gifted with but small muscular development, and he feels himself in consequence quite unequal to the task of removing her by force, for the fact cannot be concealed that she is a lady of both abnormal weight and resolution.

Mrs. Stockton, too, has contracted the most objectionable habit of appearing at times when least expected; and one night Mrs. Andrews is walking upstairs in the dusk, when suddenly, without a warning

sound of any description, the dreaded figure confronts her, with large, glaring, phosphorescent eyes, grinding her teeth and breathing heavily, and bearing no resemblance to a human being. At least, such is the account of the occurrence given afterwards by Mrs. Andrews herself, though it is true that the accuracy of her statement may be fairly challenged, for on more than one occasion she was heard to admit that she was so terrified at the time that she fell down with a nervous shriek upon the floor, and saw and remembered nothing afterwards.

Had the ladies only been able to take a peep into the internal workings of Mrs. Stockton's brain, they would have become much easier in their minds, for, to their great relief, they would have found that none of their personalities ever entered into the venomous old woman's calculations. Steadfast in her one resolve to revenge herself for the indignities which she had suffered at the hands of Frank Grandby and Miss Forsdyke, she utterly ignored their very existences. Her one aim in life was to pay off the young couple

in their own coin, and to humble them to the dust.

With regard to the former, she nourished one or two most unpleasant recollections. He had menaced her with the lock-up; he had threatened to smash her bonnet flat, and to throttle her, unless 'she shut her jaw;' and he had called her 'a darned old frump'! What wonder was it, then, that all her virtuous matronhood rose in indignation to wipe out such stinging insults?

But, strive as she might, she could discover nothing leading to a likely consummation of her revenge. It is true that she had a clue, for she was morally convinced that there existed between them an intimacy of a character unsuspected by the world—on more than one occasion, when they had happened to be in close proximity, she had noticed their covert glances, and she had also heard him address the girl familiarly by her Christian name—but as yet the clue had led to no results. But failure did not discourage her—on the contrary, it seemed to increase her powers of perseverance, and her deter-

mination to finally succeed in running them to earth.

On the morning on which Grandby is so terribly affected by the discovery of Diana's love, Mrs. Stockton is prowling aimlessly round the tennis-courts, with her eyes directed on the ground, brooding darkly over her plots and plans. Four ladies had been indulging in a game of tennis, but at their arch-enemy's approach they had unanimously agreed that they were too fatigued to proceed further with the game, and, without waiting to collect the balls, they had fled precipitately, for the idea had gained ground in the last two days that Mrs. Stockton was really going mad, and was consequently liable to commit any enormity without a moment's warning.

The old woman watches their departure with a grim smile of satisfaction on her heavy face. She notices their hurried glances, and evident desire to avoid all contact with her; she chuckles sardonically to herself at the sight, for she knows that 'the cowardly pack of cackling fools,' as she collectively brands them in her mind,

are terribly afraid of her, and, meaning them no special harm, she likes playing on their fears to the very limit of her power.

She takes possession of the vacated courts, and begins to prowl up and down backwards and forwards, like an old she-bear confined within a cage, though we feel in duty bound to apologise to the whole of the ladies of the ursine race for venturing on the comparison. No creature, bird, beast, or deep-sea monster could in justice bear comparison with the wife of Colonel Stockton of the Bengal Cavalry, for none of them could be accused, whatever the ferocity of their acts, —poor, soulless things—of having deliberately destroyed the moral sense which Providence had bestowed on them.

Walking round and round, she might have been observed to give a tennis-ball lying in her path a savage kick which sends it spinning half-way across the lawn. The action is figurative of her undying hate to Grandby and Miss Forsdyke.

It is half-past eleven, and, as the neigh-

bouring clock strikes, she hears the door of the little hut above her open, and in another moment she sees Grandby's lithe, supple figure swinging down the inclined path.

Even she, in her terrible hatred, cannot conceal from herself what a graceful form it is. She notes the elegant length of limb, and the classic shapeliness of his well-set head, and her face becomes distorted with a bitter scowl, for the knowledge of his beauty is gall and wormwood to her maddened spirit. There is a pale, weary look upon his face, and as he walks along, unconscious of her presence, he draws his handkerchief from his pocket, and draws it across his brow. In doing so, a small piece of paper falls fluttering to the ground.

It does not escape her wary eyes, and, as he disappears through the door-way of the hotel, she clambers up the bank and pounces on it, transferring it quickly to her pocket. Looking hastily around her, to ascertain whether the action has passed unperceived, she walks with hurried steps to her apartment. Arriving there, with

fevered haste she opens it, and this is what she reads:

'My Love—my Darling,

'I have suspected it all along. How can I blame you when I, too, have been guilty of the same terrible weakness? Meet me in the old place at four o'clock.

'D. F.'

'At last!' she cries, her face overspread with a gleam of savage joy. 'At last I have you in my hands! Ha! ha! Miss Diana Forsdyke! I will accompany you in your promenade, and, if I am not much mistaken, there will be an unexpected third at your pleasant little meeting this afternoon!'

The two stand facing one another in the depths of the silent wood. Filled with a guilty sense of shame, they hardly dare to look into one another's eyes. Like unto the first parents of mankind, they have tasted of the tree of knowledge, and their eyes are opened, and they are ashamed, for

they know, figuratively, that they are naked.

'Diana,' he says, and his voice is so altered that he can barely recognise it as his own. 'Diana—we must part. I have come to say a last good-bye.'

His face is as pale as death, and he tries to speak his own death-knell bravely and distinctly, though his heart is breaking with the greatness of its agony.

'Good-bye—to say good-bye!' she repeats, in faltering tones. 'Ah! Frank—my love, what do you mean?' With an effort, he raises his eyes to meet her own.

'Yes—I have come to say good-bye,' he says again, vainly endeavouring to steady the tremor in his voice. 'We were mad to have ever thought that it could have ended differently from this. Had we not been so young and foolish, we should have known that an intimacy such as ours could but end in one result.'

For a moment she gazes fixedly at him with a scared expression on her paling face as though doubtful of her senses, and then she holds out her arms towards him and a sudden cry escapes her lips.

'I love you!' she wails, 'I love you, Frank—I cannot give you up!'

At the sound of that beloved voice, raised in such piteous confession, he takes a step towards her, unable to resist the burning desire to fold her to his heart—and then he masters himself, and checks the impulse, and allows his outstretched arm to fall to his side.

'We both have need of more than human strength of mind,' he says, with a strange huskiness in his throat, attempting to speak calmly, and gradually yielding to the intensity of his passion. 'Diana—my own—my life—my darling—I love you more than all the world. I love you fiercely—madly, with a passionate, despairing love—for we can never be more to one another than we are now—we must be as strangers to one another for evermore. Ah! Diana—Diana!' he is on his knees beside her, with his arm clasped around her waist. 'How can I atone? How can I ask you to forgive me, for having brought upon you this awful misery?'

Tears check his further utterance—a wild sob breaks from his throat, and he strains her passionately to his breast.

Trembling in every limb, with a face the hue of death, she bends down over him and kisses him on the face.

'Frank—why do you ask me for forgiveness? What is there to forgive?' she whispers, huskily, glancing down on him with eyes suffused with tears. 'This is not misery to love you and have my love returned! It is joy—wild, mad, delirious joy! And you talk to me of parting, of bidding me good-bye! Good-bye! Frank—my love—my darling! do you think that I can let you go away from me for ever? Do you think that I can yield you up, now that you are mine? Never—never, Frank—or I die!'

'Diana—do not tempt me!' he says, hoarsely, pressing his head against her waist. 'We must part—there is no help for it—you do not understand! My little love, I dare not—cannot ask you to be my wife—for I am poor, and am quite unable to offer you a fitting home—all I can give you is a life of degrading want and care.'

'Oh, Frank!' she whispers, pressing her fingers caressingly through his hair. 'Why have you such a poor opinion of my love?

What is poverty and want to me if I possess your love? With that priceless gift, shall I not be far richer and happier than any empress since the world began? Darling—your life is mine, and I must share it with you, and we will brave the world together, strengthened by our mutual love.'

For one short moment, under the influence of his mighty passion, he feels on the point of yielding to her tender tones—and then a new strength invigorates his frame, and, with a sudden movement, he hastily rises to his feet.

'Never—Diana—never!' he cries, starting back, with outstretched arms. 'It can never be—you do not know what you are asking! My love for you is far too great and powerful to bring you to such misery. We must part—Diana, we must part—there is no hope for us on earth! Ah! God—my heart is breaking!'

A deadly pallor settles on his face, and a sudden mist, rising before his eyes, deprives him of his sight; a sense of giddiness overcomes him, and he leans against the oak-tree for support. In a moment she is beside him, clinging to his arm.

'Frank—my darling—you shall not go!' she cries, with a fierce energy which wakens up the silence of the wood. 'You are mine, and mine alone—and I must keep you—or I shall die! What is poverty to me? What is want, and penury, and sordid cares when I possess your love to . . .'

'Diana—let me go!' he cries, hoarsely, disengaging his arm with a sudden jerk. 'Why do you thus prolong our torture? We must part—it is written so above—there is no hope for us in life! Let us separate at once—as calmly as we can! Let us try to imagine that we shall meet again to-morrow! This agony is killing me. Diana—good-bye!'

With one last look he turns round and strides away. It is better thus—better for both of them—to separate without a parting scene.

With a low, despairing cry she follows him, and throws her arms around his neck.

'Kiss me!' she whispers, fiercely. 'Kiss me, Frank, my darling—my love—my life! Ah!—you shall not go—you shall not leave me! I will cling to you—and hold you here—lock you in my fierce

embrace—refuse to give you up! Frank, Frank . . .'

He strains her to his heart, pouring hot kisses on her tear-stained face. It is the last time that he will ever feel her in his arms—ever look upon her face again! The agony of the moment is more than he can bear. With a hoarse cry of heart-breaking anguish, he rudely repulses her half-fainting form, and tears himself away.

In another moment he is face to face with Mrs. Stockton!

Unperceived by the agitated couple, she has crept stealthily along the damp mould of the beaten pathway, and she is now standing before them, a gleam of fiendish satisfaction irradiating her cruel, bad face.

For a moment neither of them speaks, and then Mrs. Stockton bursts into a peal of scornful laughter.

'And so, Mr. Grandby, you are exposed at last!' she says, eyeing him with a look of the direst hate. 'May I venture to inquire your motive for enticing this young girl into this secluded spot?'

Pale as death, he passes his arm around Diana's waist.

'Mrs. Stockton!' he says, looking her

haughtily in the face, 'your imputation is as scandalous as it is vile. Miss Forsdyke has done me the honour of promising to be my wife.'

CHAPTER VII.

FAMA NIHIL EST CELERIUS.

HALF-PAST six in the evening, and the ladies of the hotel are congregated *en masse* in the drawing-room, prior to robing themselves for dinner. Animated to the verge of argumentative is the conversation of that galaxy of beauty.

They have just returned from the tennis-tournament which has been held that afternoon on the public courts, and they are volubly engaged in discussing the result. Is or is not Miss Rigby—the winner of the single ties—the right person in the right place? Was it sterling merit or merely lucky chance that has gained for her the victory? Opinions differ, and when, may it be asked, do *not* opinions differ

when twenty amiable ladies collect together in one room?

Mrs. Lamb is firmly convinced as to the correctness of the result—Mrs. Blewitt is firmly convinced to the contrary. Mrs. Lamb expresses the greatest admiration for Miss Rigby's play—Mrs. Blewitt considers it detestable.

What further amenities might have ensued between the two opinionated ladies, it is impossible to say, for at this moment the door suddenly opens and conversation ceases—for, to the company's intense dismay, Mrs. Stockton is seen upon the threshold. Most of the ladies rise. There is but one thought influencing every mind: *Chacune pour soi, et Dieu pour toutes!*'

The old woman, with her bonnet and fringe all awry, her fat, repulsive face streaming with perspiration, stands in the doorway gasping for breath, and attempting to speak in vain. Perceiving the evident intention of those present to beat a hasty retreat as soon as possible, she signs to them not to leave the room, and then she sinks down into a low chair, and fans herself furiously with a newspaper, which she takes from off the table at her side.

The ladies regard her with pleasurable curiosity, and smile to one another at the grotesque appearance which she presents, their courage gradually rising in the scale as they become aware of her powerless condition. What can be the matter? What can be the reason of this alarming collapse?

Prompted by an irrepressible curiosity, they timidly advance around her chair and peer into her gruesome countenance which is now of a purple hue consequent on her strenuous endeavours to regain her breath. Mrs. Blewitt, bolder than the rest, bends over her with a steady scrutiny, and then she lifts her head and murmurs significantly the one word, 'Brandy!' at which an unmistakable titter runs throughout the room.

At the sound the old woman struggles into a sitting posture, and, waving her arms in furious dissent, glares around the room —which effectually represses all inclination to merriment.

'I have seen them!' she splutters in disjointed gasps. 'I have found—them out at—last! Kissing and—hugging in—the wood!'

For a moment there is a dead silence; and then arises a perfect babel of tongues clamouring for information. The suggestion of a scandal, such as her words have implied, is sufficient to at once deaden the sense of repugnance which they feel towards her.

'Kissing and hugging!' rises the breathlessly excited cry. 'In a wood! Oh! tell us, dear Mrs. Stockton—who were they—tell us all you know?'

The old woman, panting and puffing, proceeds to tell her tale. There were two young people dwelling in the hotel at that moment, she said, who had, she regretted to say, contracted a most improper intimacy. For a long time, she must admit, she had had her suspicions on the point—she had noticed sly looks and covert glances pass between them, and she had heard them apply endearing epithets to one another when they had imagined themselves alone, but it was not until that afternoon that her very worst suspicions had been confirmed.

'But their names—their names!' cry the frantic chorus of Christian women. 'Oh! dear—*dear* Mrs. Stockton—let us have their names!'

'The persons to whom I allude are Mr. Grandby and Miss Forsdyke,' she says, slowly, noting, with a glance of savage triumph, the looks of perfect amazement which follow her announcement.

'Oh—oh—oh—oh!'

A murmur of stupefied ejaculation fills the room. The ladies are literally incapable of articulating one coherent word, so great is their astonishment.

'Yes—you may well say *oh!*' says Mrs. Stockton, with a chuckle of delight. 'You may well express incredulity at the news! It seems impossible—does it not? But it is true, all the same—yes, it is true—I can vouch for it on my honour as a Christian woman.'

Though this voucher on the part of Mrs. Stockton for the reliability of her information has no great influence on the minds of those assembled, still not one of them entertains the least doubt upon the matter. Such a delicious, heavenly piece of scandal could not be otherwise than true!

'Oh! tell us all!' they murmur, in soft purring tones, crowding round her, bustling with excitement.

Mrs. Stockton commences, with the greatest relish, to give the painful details of the whole affair. They are very, *very* painful to her, she says, with a melancholy wobble of the head, and up-lifting of the eyes—in fact, she had never imagined that such depravity *could* be possible between two individuals moving in polite society. The knowledge of their guilt had been a most terrible—horrible shock to her, for, from the very first commencement of her acquaintance with them both, she had taken a kindly interest of no mean order in their welfare. She had always thought that youth was synonymous with innocence, but—alas! her story will show how cruelly she has been mistaken.

It was with a feeling of great concern, she says sadly, that she first began to suspect that there was something wrong between them. She tried to stifle her suspicions—to argue them away—to close her eyes—but, alas, all in vain! The more she saw of them together, the more she became convinced that there existed between them a secret understanding. For many days she stirred neither hand nor foot; she thought that possibly they

might come to see the wickedness of their ways, and might repent, and so she hoped a scandal might be averted. But no—it was not to be! Instead of trying to conceal their guilt, probably boldened by their success, they literally paraded it before her eyes; and the sight she saw was horrible—was disgusting—it simply sickened her.

'Oh! tell us all!' cries the chorus, in beseeching tones. No—Mrs. Stockton regrets that she cannot comply with their request. She has not yet fallen so low, she thanks her God in reverential tones, as to allow herself to debase her lips by describing what she saw. It was too appalling to be mentioned by a virtuous woman, even in the presence of a company of *married* women. The ladies present must rest content with the statement that the sight she saw convinced her, beyond a doubt, that there existed between the two a most improper, not to say indecent, state of relationship.

After this, she continues in a mournful tone, she felt that it was her bounden duty to do her best to expose the depravity of the iniquitous pair; and in arriving at this

conclusion, be it understood, she was actuated merely by a moral motive—she did not think it right that so many virtuous women as the hotel contained should be contaminated longer than possible by personal contact with such wretches!

A rustle of excitement fills the room. The energy of Mrs. Stockton's diction is peculiarly pleasing to her audience!

'No,' she says, 'from that moment I determined to lay bare their wickedness, and, considering the enormity of their crime, I do not think, that anyone can accuse me of unchristian conduct in arriving at this resolve.'

'No—no, dear Mrs. Stockton,' purrs the chorus. 'It was most unselfish of you to take upon yourself the duty!'

Well, that morning, she says, resuming her narration, with a malicious smile of triumph on her face which she vainly attempts to suppress, in virtue of her newly-adopted Christian *rôle*—that morning, she chanced to be strolling in the garden, and, on returning towards the house, her attention was attracted to a piece of paper lying on the ground. *Quite unconsciously on her part*, she stooped

down and picked it up, and, in an *absent-minded kind of way*, she opened it and read it. What was her astonishment to find it signed with the initials of Diana Forsdyke, and addressed to Mr. Grandby! It was a letter, commencing with 'My love, my darling,' and couched in a phraseology which she—though she might possibly be accused of being old-fashioned in her ideas—regarded as indecent. No—she regrets to say that she cannot sully her lips with giving it verbatim—she has said once, and she must now again repeat, that she is a virtuous wife, and mother of a family, and, as such, cannot be too careful of her morals! The letter ended up with these words, 'Meet me at the *same* place at four o'clock!' What was she to do? There was literally only one course open to her, and she took it—she determined to follow Miss Forsdyke to the place of assignation!

'And did you go? Oh! Mrs. Stockton, let me ring for a glass of water—I am sure you are fatigued!'

Yes—she went! Inclination was sacrificed in the cause of duty, and she tracked Miss Forsdyke—following behind her at a certain distance—out of the little iron gate

beyond the tennis-courts, and up the long avenue, leading out into the open. Arriving there, to her astonishment, Miss Forsdyke had disappeared.

'In vain I hunted everywhere—but she was nowhere to be seen. After half-an-hour's fruitless search, I began to retrace my steps, and then suddenly I perceived a little path leading off the road behind a large projecting rock. Following it as quickly as I could, it took me down —down—down into the dark recesses of a wood, and it was there that I came across the pair locked in each other's arms!'

Locked in each other's arms!'

More than one lady rises to her feet, breathless with excitement.

'Yes—in each other's arms! The girl —the bare-faced hussy—was hanging round his neck imploring him to kiss her, telling him that she meant to cling to him for ever. I was never so horror-struck in my life—I could have sunk into the ground from very shame.'

'And did he kiss her?' It is Mrs. Andrews' little voice, raised in feverish excitement, that puts the question.

'*Kiss* her!' says Mrs. Stockton, with the

supremest scorn. '*Kiss* her—did you ask? He kissed her to that extent that I felt quite sick. He kissed her with such a savage ferocity that my head turned quite giddy at the sight—and when I looked again she was tottering on the ground and he was standing before me, with his guilty-stricken face as pale as death.'

'Ah! he saw you!'

'Yes, he saw me—and never shall I forget that scared expression on his face—guilty as he was, from the bottom of my heart I pitied him!'

Mrs. Stockton seems quite overcome by the pathos of the recollection. She leans back in her chair and covers her face with her great chubby hands, her motherly heart apparently overflowing with sympathy and commiseration. In reality she is thinking how best to finish her highly-varnished narrative.

'Yes—you pitied him!' murmurs Mrs. Bird, soothingly, longing for the finale. 'And—and what did you say?'

'Yes, I pitied him,' says Mrs. Stockton, sadly, removing her hands. 'But my pity was thrown away, as you will see. Raising

my voice in mild reproach, I said, "Oh! Mr. Grandby—what have you been doing—my heart bleeds to see you in this questionable position?" And what did he say? How did he treat me for my kindness? He insulted me vilely, infamously, heaping abuse of the lowest order upon my head, and then he passed his arm around the brazen hussy's waist, and said, "Mrs. Stockton—this young lady is my betrothed!" '

'His betrothed!—Impossible!—Mrs. Stockton—*dear* Mrs. Stockton, are you sure you are not mistaken?'

'Mistaken!—no, I am not mistaken!' she answers, savagely, rising from her seat. 'He not only said it once—he repeated it—he flung it in my face, as it were, as much as to say, "How dare you impute evil motives to us, who are as pure as snow?"—and then he rudely pushed me aside, and, hanging indecently on to one another, they left me standing in the wood. Oh! but it was a horrible—revolting sight!'

She covers her face with her hands, and gives vent to a shudder of outraged virtue,

the ladies crowding round her offering sympathetic condolences, and thirsting for further details.

That night at dinner no other subject is discussed. For the first time since her husband's decampment, Mrs. Stockton makes her appearance, and she is well satisfied with her reception, for she is the cynosure of all eyes and the centre of all talk from the beginning to the end of the repast. Anything more sweetly—horribly —delightfully interesting, the ladies cannot imagine, and they bubble over with excitement, asking endless frivolous questions, some of which are not in the best of taste, and commenting on all possible issues of the affair. The characters of the two young people are discussed threadbare, and naturally the old vague scandal concerning Miss Forsdyke's past is not forgotten, and is brought to light again encrusted with further embellishments due to the effect of time.

With regard to Frank Grandby, they are all unanimous in his praise. He is so perfectly handsome, so exquisitely moulded, so graceful, so courtly, so irresistibly fascinating—ah! poor young man, they

sadly fear that he has been fooled in the hands of an unscrupulous adventuress. He is so sweet, so artistic and graceful in all his movements, so amiable, so truly lovable, with just that *soupçon* of wickedness in his composition so essential to true manliness. Ah, how they pity him!—how their tender little hearts ache in sympathy for his misfortune!

At this unqualified eulogium on Grandby's person Mrs. Stockton gives a grunt of decided disapproval, but, finding herself so greatly in the minority, she does not venture to express aloud her private opinion on the matter.

Mrs. Lamb, with a vivid scarlet lighting up her faded cheek, bends nervously over her plate, and says nothing. She is the one single person amidst that congregation of Christian women who is really unaffectedly sorry at the incident.

Will he come to dinner that evening? That is the principal question which agitates the fair assemblage, the masculine element refusing to discuss the matter at all—Major Lamb in particular pooh-poohing the excitement caused by 'such a really ordinary, common-place affair.'

'Bosh!' he says, abruptly, when appealed to on the subject. 'I never condemn woman nor man unheard; probably the whole thing has been grossly misrepresented and exaggerated.' And then he refuses to allude to the matter again, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously at the savage glare which he receives sideways from Mrs. Stockton.

But, could they have seen Frank Grandby at that moment, the question of his possible appearance at dinner that night would have been speedily settled. Whilst he and his affairs were being thus publicly discussed at the dinner-table, he himself was seated in his own room, his head buried in his arms upon the table, and he had been in that position, with his brain seemingly all on fire, rendering it impossible for him to think coherently, from the time that he had said good-night to Diana at the little gate that evening.

He had brought her back from the wood without a word, his mind too agitated for speech. It was only when he arrived at the garden that he broke the silence. He bent down then and kissed her on the forehead.

'Good-night, my darling,' he said. 'It is fated that we should brave the world together. May God not forgive me if I am ever other to you than good and true.'

She had kissed him in return, and with a low sob, which seemed to check her utterance, she had left him.

He cannot, now, conceal from himself the horrible awkwardness of his position. How can he claim as his betrothed a woman with whom he is supposed to be barely acquainted? How can he efface the terrible scandal which is certain to arise when the facts are known? How can he restore to Diana the purity of her name? How can he prove to the world that he has been innocent of any base intention? These, and similar questions, now occupy his mind.

That other great question, as to how he is to keep a wife, he does not attempt to answer. There is only one course open to his honour, and that is to marry the girl, and thus to do the best in his power to repair the awful wrong that he has done her; so the question of actual means does not enter into his calculations. Whether he can afford to marry or not, whether his

so doing will mean bankruptcy and dishonour, is of no consequence whatever; as the matter stands, come what may, it is his bounden duty to marry her immediately, and he must do his duty.

About half-past eight he rises from his seat and makes a hasty toilette. As a result of his meditation, he has determined to consult Mrs. Lamb as to how he should proceed upon the morrow. She is the only woman in the place of whose kindly interest he is assured, and he feels that in a case like this a woman's judgment will be preferable to a man's.

Mrs. Lamb receives him kindly. He finds her alone in her room, making pretence to read a novel, and, after a few preliminary courtesies, he plunges *in medias res*, confiding to her the difficulties of his position, and concealing nothing. She listens attentively, with a look of sympathy on her pallid face, occasionally interrupting him to put some pointed question.

It is some time before she can bring herself to understand the idea of the Great Platonic Friendship—anything so mad and fantastical she has never heard before—and he has to repeat and asseverate over

and over again that he was really earnest in his belief in the possibility of such a state of intimacy between man and woman.

'What am I to do?' he says, his face torn with a grave anxiety. 'I have explained to you unreservedly the whole matter, and you see now in what a very awkward position I am placed. It is plainly my duty to marry Miss Forsdyke. How am I to do it?'

She gives him a side glance out of her pale blue eyes, unable to prevent smiling at the *naïveté* of his question.

'You really mean to marry her at once?' she asks.

'At once,' he answers. 'I know that I cannot offer her a fitting home, that I am not really well enough off to keep a wife —but there is no other course left open to me.'

'And you are certain of your love?'

'Quite certain—I love her, as I never thought it possible for a man to love a woman.'

'Mr. Grandby,' she says, bending towards him, and speaking in earnest tones. 'I certainly think that you have been

much to blame—you should have had more sense than to have believed in the continuity of a platonic friendship between two young people of your age and looks. You should have known better the frailty of the human heart, and should never have voluntarily exposed it to such a terrible temptation. By having done so, you now find yourself in this horrible complication. The honour and good name of a young girl are at stake! You intend to make all amends in your power by marrying her—you love her, but you cannot afford to keep her. What will be the result? It must end in unhappiness—love and want are directly antagonistic.'

'It cannot be helped,' he says, huskily. 'It is no good for me to look to the future, I must trust to luck for that. What concerns me is the present. How would you advise me to act on the morrow?'

'Then you are quite resolved to sacrifice your life?'

'It is no sacrifice,' he interposes, quickly. 'I love her, and inclination prompts me to marry her, as well as duty.'

'Then,' says Mrs. Lamb, slowly, 'it is evident what you must do—you must call

on Mrs. Renfrew, and explain the matter to her fully, and ask her formally for her niece's hand.'

'It will be a terrible ordeal,' he says, faintly.

'It will,' she answers, quietly. 'If you like, Mr. Grandby, I shall be very happy to help you to the best of my ability. I will call on'

'No, no, no!' he hastily interposes, rising from his seat. 'I am deeply grateful to you for your goodness to-night, and I thank you very much for your offer of assistance, but I feel that it would not be right of me to take advantage of your kindness. In this crisis of my life, I must learn to think and act for myself. My future looks indeed dark and gloomy, but it can never assume a brighter aspect unless I begin at once to act independently, trusting to no one for assistance.'

'You are right,' she says, rising, and holding out her hand. 'You are old enough to guide your own destiny. Firmness of character and resolution are the attributes of true manliness.'

'I thank you for the precept,' he says, raising her fingers to his lips. 'You have

proved yourself to-night a true friend. Through foolishness and inexperience, I have dragged an innocent girl into the abyss of shame and ruin, and it will be my one aim in life henceforth to bring her out of it unharmed. From to-night I enter upon a new life! From this moment I become a man!'

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AWKWARD INTERVIEW.

The next morning, Grandby receives a short letter from Grafton. It is a letter of no importance, merely a few short lines of casual gossip, such as hearts in sympathy like to read and write, but it is sufficient to recall to his mind his friend's personality which has been temporarily effaced by the agitation of the last few hours.

The postscript refers to George's secret engagement.

'The day on which you read this note, will be the tenth of September. For six months that day has stood out in my mind, like some beacon-light on a dark night—for it was to have been the day of my release from silence—it was this day on

which I was to have claimed my little darling in person. But fate has ordained it otherwise. Through my little wife-to-be having gone into the Gullies, my term of probation has been extended to the twenty-sixth. A fortnight more! But what is a fortnight? If Jacob served fourteen years for Rachel, surely I need not complain of fourteen days! Adieu, dear Frank!'

Grandby folds up the letter thoughtfully. What will his dear, sober-minded friend think of the madness of his intention? What will he say, when he hears that he is about to marry on his miserable allowance? It is true that George himself is going to marry, possessing no private means whatever; but then their cases are in no way analogous, for George's pay is more than double his own, and being in the Engineers, his likelihood of pecuniary preferment is almost certain, for, young as he is, his good judgment and sound common-sense have already been noticed favourably at head-quarters. And, besides this, Grandby is well aware that his friend has expectations, though certainly of a very doubtful nature, from a rich

bachelor uncle, who had made his money sheep-farming in Australia. He for his part has no expectations whatever, save a sum of six thousand pounds which he will inherit on his mother's death, the most of her income dying with her. So he can never hope to possess more than five hundred of his own, beside his pay, and to marry on that, with the hope of rearing a family creditably in these days of expensive education, is, he is well aware, the action of a madman.

And then he whistles lightly, and tries to banish the thought from his mind. It is wonderful how calm he is on this soft autumnal morning. All trace of agitation has disappeared. He no longer falls with his head upon the table, unable to think or act; for there is a new-born look of resolution on his face, which means that he is determined to confront the difficulty manfully. Even the prospect of his visit to Mrs. Renfrew after breakfast, he views with calm tranquillity—for, in one night, a new strength has come upon him, and he feels strong enough to battle with the world.

He walks bravely into the breakfast-room, and orders his morning meal. He is quite aware that everybody in the house is engaged in discussing his affairs, and he wishes to show them, by appearing boldly in their midst, that he has done nothing of which he is ashamed.

There are four or five ladies clustering together at one end of the table, chattering like magpies, and, as he enters the room, their faces assume a look of foolish guilt, and they suddenly become quite silent. He knows exactly what has been the subject of their conversation, and he smiles to himself over their evident confusion. He walks easily up to them, says good-morning, and sits down beside them. They all grow very red, and, as he notices it, he smiles again.

Major Lamb, from across the table, raises his eyes from his newspaper, and says, heartily, 'Good-morning, Grandby, my boy!' and then continues the perusal of the leading article. The ladies offer no remark, but sit looking awkwardly into one another's faces, and Grandby, inwardly amused at their embarrassment, determines not to break the silence. In a few minutes,

they have all departed, and are seated in a public room above, volubly discussing his calm assurance.

'I am of half a mind to disbelieve the whole story,' cries little Mrs. Andrews. 'No man, with such a grave scandal overhanging him, could have conducted himself so coolly.'

'And I, on the contrary, am confirmed in my belief,' answers Mrs. Blewitt, shrewdly. 'Twice he smiled to himself in a way which convinced me of its truth. I admire him immensely for the manly courage he displays. It strikes me rather forcibly that we all looked decidedly foolish on his entry.'

Grandby applies himself diligently to his breakfast, which he eats with a hearty appetite, delighted to find that neither love nor anxiety have had the power to quell the natural craving after nourishment.

Presently Major Lamb lays down his paper and cautiously refers to the subject of the scandal with the intention of discovering what truth there may be in it. Grandby answers him straightforwardly without the least attempt at reserve.

Major Lamb is lost in astonishment when he hears that his wife has been acquainted with the full facts of the case the night before.

'Can it be really possible?' he asks, incredulously. 'And she has never said a word to me about it! Surely the millenium has arrived at last!'

'It is quite true,' answers Grandby, gravely. 'I went to her last night for advice, the result of which is that in an hour's time I intend to present myself boldly before Mrs. Renfrew and claim her niece for my wife.'

The major makes a wry grimace.

'I hope you will succeed,' he says, heartily, 'but I am afraid that you have not a very pleasant task before you. Take my advice, and fortify your nerves with something stronger than woman's cat-lap.'

'No, thank you,' replies Grandby, smiling. 'Dutch courage is a most unreliable quality, and likely to fail utterly in a moment of emergency. And such a contingency I cannot risk, for it is essential to Miss Forsdyke's honour that I succeed. No one is better aware than myself how greatly I have been to blame, and I shall

make no attempt to palliate my offence. I shall make a clean breast of the whole affair, ask forgiveness, and then kneel down, I hope, beside my future wife and receive the benevolent lady's blessing.'

He rises with a laugh, says good-morning, and leaves the room.

He finds a note from Loftus lying on the table, and on opening it he discovers that it has been written over-night.

It runs as follows:

'DEAR OLD CHAP,

'A strange rumour has arrived at the club to-night—it is to the effect that you have publicly announced your engagement to Miss Forsdyke. Will you give me authority to contradict the report?

'Yours, in haste,

'VERNON LOFTUS.

'P.S.—To-morrow I have arranged to spend the day at Changla Gulli, and as I am to start early I take this opportunity of scribbling you this note. The lateness of the hour (2.35 a.m.) is alone responsible for its brevity.'

Grandby immediately sits down to answer him. He draws his desk towards him, choses a piece of paper, and takes his pen—and then he jumps up quickly. The fact has just struck him that he is totally unable to answer Loftus' question until he knows the result of his interview with Mrs. Renfrew. For all he knows, the vinegary old lady may show him the door and refuse to have anything whatever to do with him !

But Mrs. Renfrew does nothing of the kind—on the contrary, she receives him very graciously. She begs him to be seated, at the same time apologising for being incapable of rising from the sofa—she has been so *very* ill—and then she glances critically at his face with her head on one side, and murmurs, abstractedly,

'Yes—he is really very like that statue in the Louvre.'

Grandby, feeling, it must be confessed, far from at his ease, pays no attention to her soliloquy. He seats himself beside the sofa, and opens the conversation by inquiring politely after the state of her health. He has heard that she has been so ill of

late, he says, that he has really felt quite anxious concerning her.

She smoothes out the shawl lying across her lap, with a martyr's look of resignation. Yes, she says, she has been far from well —it has, in fact, pleased the Omnipotent Power to rob her of her health and to cause her dreadful suffering of the body. Probably, as in the case of that good man Job, her sickness has been sent to her to test the strength of her belief and piety. But she is thankful to say that she has withstood the trial—though at times racked with inexpressible torture and agony, she has never once complained. If to *try* her is the Almighty's motive, she is glad to think that she has resisted the temptation and has emerged from it scathless. At the same time she cannot help stating—meaning no disrespect to those who are above her, be it understood—that she disapproves strongly of the practice of trying an old and faithful servant by placing temptation directly in his way. There is something low and mean about the notion which she is utterly unable to stomach—but then of course, she hastens to add, different people of necessity hold

different ideas on every subject under the sun.

Grandby fully concurs with her in this remark. It is curious to note, he says, how firmly men will hold to directly opposite opinions. One will swear a thing is black, an equally intelligent person will swear that it is white, and no power on earth will be capable of convincing either of them to the contrary. All the time the thing in question happens to be red!

Mrs. Renfrew agrees to his assertion in the abstract—it *is* very curious, she says, how the nerve-power in different brains produces exactly opposite results. But, with regard to his particular illustration, she hopes he will excuse her if she hints that it is not free from gross exaggeration. If two gentlemen in the billiard-room after dinner were to affirm respectively that the red ball was black and white, it would not be owing so much to any peculiarity in their mode of thinking, she is afraid, as to the fact that they had drunk too much wine at table.

Grandby, with a little smile, ventures

to remark that he had not intended his illustration to be considered literally. It was merely a figure of speech, used to exemplify how often two individuals, who fight hammer and tongs to assert their own opinion, are both equally at fault.

Mrs. Renfrew apologises for having misunderstood his meaning in such a truly foolish manner. She is sadly afraid that the severity of her sufferings is undermining her capacity for rapid comprehension—and then the subject drops, and there follows silence, and Grandby becomes conscious that he is no nearer the completion of the task before him than when the conversation first began.

After an awkward pause he ventures to inquire after Miss Forsdyke. He notices that she is not in the room, he says, lamely. Might he presume to ask whether she happens to be enjoying at the present moment a constitutional stroll?

Miss Forsdyke is perambulating the high roads, Mrs. Renfrew answers, in a somewhat injured tone. Her niece has never before shown herself so inconsiderate as to wish to take fresh air in the

morning. Her usual time for exercise was between four and six—two hours a day were surely sufficient for any healthy young woman in the enjoyment of a fair appetite.

Grandby agrees that two hours a day are quite sufficient for any ordinary being; but he ventures to remind her that Miss Forsdyke's work in the sick-room is possibly of a sufficiently arduous character to cause her headaches and depression, and that consequently in her case a little extra fresh air might prove beneficial.

Yes—Mrs. Renfrew agrees with him that Miss Forsdyke's post in the sick-room is no sinecure. Her niece is a very efficient nurse, she says. In fact, she considers her to be a very estimable young person in every way, in spite of the contrary opinion held concerning her by her own father.

Grandby expresses his exceeding sorrow at hearing that Colonel Forsdyke holds a bad opinion of his daughter. Might he be so bold as to venture to presume to ask in what particular respect the young lady is found displeasing by her father?

Mrs. Renfrew regrets exceedingly that

she cannot comply with this request. She knows nothing definitely herself upon the subject, but what she knows by intuition she thinks it advisable not to state. There are skeletons in every cupboard, she remarks, sententiously, and in her opinion it is the duty of their owners to conceal their grinning horrors from the outside world.

Grandby is conscious of the implied rebuke underlying this remark, and, thinking of nothing suitable to say, a second silence, more painful than the first, falls upon the room. At this rate of progression, he may stay here till the crack of doom, and he will not have effected his confession! He understands that it is no good for him to enter into further desultory conversation in the hopes of something turning up by which he may neatly introduce the subject uppermost in his mind. It is clearly not an occasion for beating about the bush, but one where only a display of tactics in the open field can lead to a success—so he nerves himself for the contest, and with a little preparatory cough he boldly opens the attack.

'Mrs. Renfrew,' he says, slowly and impressively, 'have you a notion of the motive of my visit to you to-day?'

'I beg your pardon,' she says, in a slightly surprised tone. 'Did I hear you aright?'

'I think you did,' he answers. 'But I will repeat the question.—Have you a notion of the motive of my visit to you to-day?'

'Good gracious, what a very extraordinary question! I suppose that your motive is none other than that of a polite young gentleman wishing to pay his respects to an elderly, invalid lady.'

'But supposing that, underlying this, there be some ulterior motive?'

'My dear Mr. Grandby—you will excuse me saying so—but really your conduct is very peculiar. Are you sure that you are quite well?'

'I am quite well,' he answers, gravely.

'Because, you know,' she adds, hastily, 'a being, cursed with disordered nerves, can never be quite responsible for his conduct. No one knows that better than myself. I have sometimes done the most

extraordinary things—things which would make you blush if mentioned. So you must not be offended with the abruptness of my question. Are you quite certain that your nerves are not disordered?'

'Quite certain!' he replies, unable to repress a smile at the absurd gravity of her question. 'For all I know concerning them, they may be as strong as six-inch rope—they never trouble me in the least. I merely insinuated that, in visiting you this morning, I was actuated by a hidden motive, and I asked you whether you could guess the same.'

'A hidden motive! How very, *very* mysterious you are becoming.'

'Cannot you guess it?'

'Guess it!—no, I am sure I can't—unless you be a tractarian, and wish to palm off some of your idiotic productions on me. But I won't stand it, Mr. Grandby! I am a good, Christian woman, and I trust that I can get to Heaven without the assistance of your half-penny imbecilities.'

'I have no doubt that you will,' answers Grandby, with preternatural gravity. 'But you are quite mistaken—I am no

tractarian. I hold such productions in the same contempt as you presumably do. May I ask you to guess again ?'

'I am glad to hear you say so, Mr. Grandby. You must forgive me for the imputation, but you know the saying, that gunners are either "Mad, married, or Methodist!" And really, Mr. Grandby, the number of Methodist ministers your regiment possesses is a disgrace to the British army. Their name is legion. Let every man follow his own calling in life, and not encroach on other people's—that's my maxim on the subject. If officers in the army feel a sudden yearning to disseminate the Gospel, let them do so by all means—but let them first retire. But to see officers, in blue cloth and gold lace, leaving the parade-ground and distributing tracts openly in public places, is an incongruity too glaring to be countenanced —and there ought to be a general order issued to that effect. Ah, I have it!' she adds, suddenly. 'But I am sorry that I can give you nothing. Charity begins at home, you know, and, much as I should like to contribute, it would really not be right . . .'

'I beg your pardon,' he hastily interposes. 'May I ask to what you are referring?'

'I suppose it is the Kaffirs?' she says, shortly. 'But I am sick to death of the very name of the Kaffirs. If it is the fashion in Kaffirland to wear no clothes, I cannot see why it should be our business to teach them better. And, besides, fashion, after all, is merely a matter of taste. Our ladies in Europe show as much of the upper part of their body as they dare—the Kaffir ladies apparently show as much of the lower. What's the difference? For my own part, I am supremely indifferent to whether they wear beads or flannel petticoats, and I do not consequently feel justified in . . .'

'But, my dear Mrs. Renfrew, you are quite mistaken—I have certainly come to ask you for something, but it is not a subscription to a charity.'

'Then what is it?' she cries, petulantly. 'Mr. Grandby, I must beg of you to tell me at once—the state of my nerves will not allow of such a dreadful suspense. What is it you want of me?'

'I want your pardon.'

'Oh, good gracious!' she cries, starting up nervously. 'Oh, Mr. Grandby, you really frighten me! What—what in the world is the matter with you?'

'I crave your pardon,' he answers, earnestly. 'Mrs. Renfrew, I have been guilty of a great crime. Unknown to you, I have learned to love your niece, and I have now come to . . .'

'To love my niece! oh! dear—oh—oh—oh!'

She falls back on the sofa and seizes an *eau-de-cologne* bottle by her side, and freely besprinkles her pocket-handkerchief, which she raises to her face. In a moment he is on his knees beside her, confessing the story of his intrigue with Diana Forsdyke.

On hearing his recital, at first she gives signs of relapsing into violent hysterics, but under the influence of those impressive tones, telling her of his guilt, and imploring her forgiveness, she gradually calms down and begins to listen to him with something approaching a tranquillity.

'Oh! Mr. Grandby—Mr. Grandby!' she

murmurs, on the completion of his tale. 'What shall I do—what shall I say? Ah! how terribly you have deceived me! That statue in the Louvre would never have behaved so dishonourably.'

'Say that you will forgive me!' he cries, seizing her by the hand, and imprinting on it a kiss of pure hypocrisy. 'Say that you will overlook my underhand conduct, and that you will give your consent to my marriage with your niece! The statue in the Louvre was merely inanimate marble, and consequently superior to all human weakness.'

'I cannot do that,' she says, slowly, 'because I am not Diana's rightful guardian. She has a father, and he alone can give his consent to your union with his daughter. Oh! dear—oh! dear—my nerves are torn to shreds!'

He continues kneeling before her, imploring her to do her best to help him in his difficulty. If something be not done *at once*, he urges, it is certain that Miss Forsdyke's good name will suffer. Already the scandal is all over Doonga, and the only effectual way of stopping it will be

to publicly announce their immediate marriage.

She fully comprehends the truth of his remark, and, to his surprise, she rises easily from her sofa, and, in apparent forgetfulness for the moment of the supposed weak state of her health, with a firm step she walks to the table, and begins to write on a piece of paper. In a few moments she rises, folds up the paper, calls a servant, and gives it to him with some directions in the Hindi tongue.

'Mr. Grandby,' she says, slowly, turning round towards him. 'No one understands better than I do the extremely critical position in which my niece is placed. I have accordingly telegraphed for her father, and he will be here to-morrow morning. He will probably catch the train from Lahore at six this evening, which will enable him to be here by midday.'

'How can I thank you sufficiently for your goodness?' he says, gratefully. 'You have indeed shown yourself my true friend.'

'I do not deserve your thanks,' she

answers, kindly. 'In acting thus, I am merely doing my duty towards my niece. It is not for me to criticise the way in which you have gained Diana's affections —that question you will have to settle with her father. As for myself, you have my cordial sympathy. In coming here to-day, and freely confessing your fault as you have done, you have disclosed to me the value of your character, and I feel convinced that you will be a worthy husband to my niece—and I have no doubt that Colonel Forsdyke will hold the same opinion, and will accord you his consent.'

On arriving at his own hut, after the satisfactory termination of his interview with Mrs. Renfrew, Grandby sits down to answer Loftus' note.

This is what he writes:

'My dear Loftus,

'The rumour which you have heard respecting my engagement with Miss Forsdyke is perfectly correct. Instead of contradicting it, kindly do your

utmost to corroborate it. Now that she is to become my wife, I trust that you will strive to overcome your foolish prejudices regarding her.

'Yours sincerely,

'FRANK GRANDBY.

CHAPTER IX.

GRAFTON IS INFORMED OF THE STATE OF AFFAIRS.

That afternoon, on the invitation of Mrs. Renfrew, Grandby again calls upon her, and takes tea with his betrothed.

After half-an-hour's desultory conversation, Mrs. Renfrew rises and retires to the inner room, on the plea of having important letters to write. She even carries the lie so far as to ask Diana to take the inkstand into her bed-room. Her real reason for retiring is, of course, to allow the young couple a few moments' private speech, and they understand her motive, and, appreciating it, take advantage of her exit by immediately falling into each other's arms, and kissing. It may have

been very wrong on their part to do such a thing; but, as this book is a faithful record of what *really* happened, the little circumstance cannot be omitted. They *did* it—and the author cannot help it, if the reader receives a moral shock; they *did* it—that is enough for him in his simple capacity of recorder. Grandby opened his arms, and folded her in his embrace, and met her lips half-way in a loving kiss.

'Ah! I am so happy!' she murmurs, softly, casting up at him a look of ineffable love and tenderness. 'It can never last!'

'Why not—Diana, love?' he whispers—they dare not speak loudly on account of Mrs. Renfrew's close proximity.—'Why should it not last for ever?'

'It cannot—it cannot,' she answers, faintly shivering.

'But it *must!*' he says, with a fierce energy, drawing her tightly towards him. 'We are poor—but what of that? Together we will face the world, happy in each other's love. As long as our love remains, what else do we require?'

'But will it do so?' she murmurs, faintly. 'Oh! Frank—you say you love me now because you think me pure and good.

Supposing that you had been deceived—supposing that, instead of being what you think me, I were base and wicked—would not your love die out for ever?'

'No, it would endure,' he answers, simply. 'A love such as mine cannot be killed by a sudden shock. It is no mere passion of the moment, rising in a day to fever height, and dying out as quickly as it rose—it is a pure strong love which has grown on me little by little for weeks, working its way so insidiously into my heart that even I myself was unaware of its existence. And it would take years to kill. Whether you were bad or good, base or pure, I should love you—because I could not help myself.'

There is something grand and noble in this simple confession of the nature of his love which touches her to the quick, and she hides her face in his shoulder with a smothered sob. Never as at this moment has she been conscious of the utter worthlessness of her character as compared with his! What would she not now give to stand before him pure and innocent, worthy in every way of his great love?

'Diana,' he says, bending over her ten-

derly. 'My little darling, what is it that distresses you?'

'Frank—Frank!' she cries, hoarsely. 'Always love me! Whatever happens in the future, tell me that you will always love me!'

'Hush—hush!' he murmurs, gently, softly stroking the ripples of her sunlit hair. 'Hush, Diana darling! You are nervous—what *can* happen in the future to destroy my love? Why do you allow such morbid fancies to take possession of your mind? This is not the time for sorrow—but for maddening joy.'

'Ah!—but you do not know! We may be parted. Something may arise between us which will separate us for ever. You will go away—you will leave me—and perhaps shudder at my very name.'

'This is really foolish of you, darling,' he urges, gently. 'What can arise between us? We shall have no secrets from one another. In the enjoyment of a perfect confidence, cause for disagreement will be impossible. Deception and concealment are at the root of most miseries.'

'Yes—yes,' she murmurs, nervously. 'Yes—yes, but'

'Ah! you are thinking of your father? You are afraid that he will be angry with us and refuse his consent to our union. But he will not do so, I feel convinced. When he sees how thoroughly dependent our future happiness is on our marriage, he will yield and will forgive us our fault. Diana, together we shall brave the world.'

He bends over her and kisses her softly on the forehead. A sudden noise in the next room warns them of the speedy advent of Mrs. Renfrew, and they hastily separate. In another moment she appears, to find them on opposite sides of the table, gazing foolishly into one another's faces.

'I have finished my letter,' she says, telling a barefaced falsehood with really admirable assurance. 'Dear me—what is the time? Half-past six—is it really possible? Well, Mr. Grandby, Colonel Forsdyke will probably be here to-morrow at twelve o'clock. You had better come to see him after lunch. I will prepare him for your visit. And you really have no need to be alarmed,' she adds, with a confiding smile. 'My brother is as soft as milk, and will, I am sure, place no un-

necessary obstacles in the way of your future happiness.'

He thanks her warmly for her kindness, and says good-night, and then, with a parting smile towards Diana, he leaves the room.

His mind is so preoccupied to-night that he determines not to face the dinner-table, but instead to dine in his own room; so, entering his hut, he gives directions to his servant to that effect. He wishes to have the evening to himself, to allow him to ruminate over his position, away from the effervescing, meaningless cackle of polite society, and he also wishes to write to Grafton, to inform him of the whole affair.

The thought of having to write this letter has been weighing heavily on his mind for the last twenty-four hours, from the moment almost when Mrs. Stockton's appearance in the wood precipitated him into an announcement of his betrothal, and, the more he has pondered on the matter, the more has he shrunk from the unpleasant task before him. He is conscious that he will present but a sorry figure in the opinion of his friend. Grafton's

calm, critical gaze will see at once the utter foolishness of his conduct in having allowed himself to become entangled in such a terrible complication, and he dreads to picture in his mind the contempt with which his friend will probably receive the news. But, now that the affair has taken such a decided turn, he feels that the love he bears his friend demands that he should not delay another moment in informing him of the matter—to conceal it longer would be a breach of friendship.

So, after dinner, he draws his desk towards him, and sits irresolutely toying with his pen, unable to frame a single sentence. What is he to say? Shall he slur over the weak points of his tale, and merely announce his engagement, or shall he disclose all the particulars which gradually led up to the present state of affairs?

He is inclined to adopt the former course, for he has no wish to expose in all its nakedness the lamentable folly he has displayed, in first imagining the possibility of a great platonic friendship, and afterwards in having failed to grasp the true nature of his feelings before it was too

late; but duty commands him to adopt the latter, and, after a short inward struggle, his sense of duty predominates over his inclination. But, besides the promptings of his conscience, his affection for Grafton militates against a contrary resolve, for it is of such a peculiarly warm character that he is unable to retain from his friend any portion of his life without experiencing a sense of guilt. For years, ever since the commencement of their boyhood's intimacy, they had never withheld from one another the slightest particular concerning the interior of their respective lives, and this custom had finally through force of habit become to both of them a law, which their moral sense forbade them to infringe.

So he begins slowly and carefully to explain to Grafton the position in which he finds himself placed. He omits nothing —he commences by narrating the circumstance of his first introduction to Miss Forsdyke, when, on his arrival at the hotel, she found him leaning half-fainting against the tree, and from this point he gradually leads on through the sequence of events

which followed, up to the final *dénouement* when they were discovered together in the wood by Mrs. Stockton.

It is a severe test of character, to have to openly and honestly confess one's own failings, but Grandby rises equal to the occasion. He does not spare himself—he does not attempt to extenuate his foolishness—he tells plainly the true facts, as they happened, without addition or omission. It is no mean task that he has set himself to do, for to render the tale coherently requires sheet after sheet of written matter, and it is nearly twelve o'clock before he finds himself approaching the conclusion of his letter.

'Ah! George,' he writes, 'what will you think of me, now that you know the whole facts of the case? Will you utterly condemn me, or will the infinite love you bear me find some excuse to palliate my weakness? You know the state of my finances—my private allowance is only £200 a year—two hundred rupees a month. My pay, with allowances, is two hundred and ninety rupees a month—so, together, I shall have four hundred and ninety rupees a

month to set up my domestic household. By dint of rigid economy, I do not see why we should not live happily on this, without incurring debt—but of course it will bind me down to India for many, many years to come. If I can only keep my health, I do not fear the future—if I were to fall ill, and be ordered home, I don't know what would happen. The prospect of a family, too, is a contemplation I do not care to face, for I suppose that children will inevitably follow from our union. Civilization, after all, is not an unmixed blessing. A Patagonian chief may increase his family to a regiment without feeling the least inconvenience, but an European officer has to strongly modify his paternal aspirations. After all, in spite of what cynics say, love goes a long way towards the promotion of happiness, and I am as certain of Diana's love for me as I am of mine for her. At any rate, in this particular I feel I have your sympathy. You, too, know the meaning of a mutual love. Oh! George, old boy, to think that we are both engaged! Would it be possible, I wonder, for us to be married on the same day together? It would be a fitting conclusion

to our long boyish friendship. After we are married, we must put away all childish things, and must settle down into staid old Benedicts—and to think that a fortnight ago I was lamenting *your* engagement, for fear lest it should mar our friendship! Ah, George, it is a rum world. We are mere puppets in the power of an unseen will, and it is folly to attempt to anticipate an hour. Write, dear old boy, and wish me joy. The only cloud which dims my happiness is the dread of your disapproval.

'Yours affectionately,

'FRANK GRANDBY.'

It is finished; with a sigh of great relief, he places it in an envelope and directs it, and then, seizing up his hat, he strides over to the hotel and posts it in the box. His heart feels light at the thought of his having made a full confession of the whole affair to his dear old friend, and he takes a short stroll in the bright moonlight around the gravel path, stealing a sly peep up at Diana's windows.

But he is disappointed if he has expected to catch a glimpse of that sweet figure;

the blinds are down before the windows, and, though he stands patiently watching for full five minutes, he is not rewarded by seeing so much as the shadow of the girl he loves. He is obliged to admit to himself that the hope of seeing her is most unreasonable, for the clock has just sounded the half-hour after midnight. She is in bed, of course, and has probably been there for the last two hours. All swathed in white, she has buried her little figure beneath the clothes, and her lovely little head is lying a patch of red-warm gold against the pillow, and—— But here his equanimity totally succumbs before the vision he has conjured up, and he turns away with a smothered gasp.

The fragrant smell of the *Gloires-de-Dijon* roses permeates the air, and he bends down and buries his face amidst their yellow crests. The excitement of the last few days has caused him to forget the mysterious circumstance of the churchyard wreaths, but now the sight of the flowers recalls them vividly to his mind, and he returns to his room, thinking deeply.

Will he ever discover the kind hand

which placed them on his sister's grave? —and, asking himself this question in ceaseless reiteration, he undresses, gets into bed, and promptly falls asleep.

CHAPTER X.

THAT SHAMELESS, WANTON WOMAN.

It is eight o'clock in the morning, and the door of Grandby's little hut is thrown violently open, and Loftus hurriedly enters the room. His customary airy nonchalance of manner has disappeared. Flushed and excited, with great beads of perspiration standing on his forehead, he slams-to the door, and throws himself heavily into a chair beside the bed.

Grandby awakes with a start, with that unpleasant sensation of personal indistinction which all men know and hate. He lies for a moment motionless, looking vaguely up to the ceiling, and trying to remember who and where he is; and then he raises his head slowly from

the pillow, and, to his great astonishment, finds Loftus seated by his side, with his legs apart, leaning forward and gazing moodily at the matting on the floor. Such is his amazement at the sight that he rubs his eyes to assure himself that he is wide awake.

'Loftus,' he cries, 'what in the name of wonder brings you here at this time of day?'

At the sound of his voice, the dejected figure comes to life with a sudden jerk. He starts forward in his chair, holds out his hand, and wishes his friend good-morning; then he falls forward again, with his head upon his hands, in the same posture as before.

With much amusement, Grandby extends his arm and shakes him by the shoulder.

'Wake up, old boy!' he says. 'What is the matter with you to-day? Have you had any bad news, or have you got a champagne-head, or have you come to congratulate me on my happiness?'

'Eh—what?' says Loftus, confusedly turning round towards him. 'What were you saying, old chap?'

'I shan't repeat what I said, since you are so impolite as to pay me no attention,' answers Grandby, smiling. 'Really, Loftus, I am beginning to be quite alarmed about you. Can you not possibly concentrate all your energies for one moment, and manage to remember what brought you here this morning? It is not your usual custom, I believe, to be gallivanting about at eight in the morning, so I presume that some very weighty reason has caused you to honour me with this morning visit.'

Loftus passes his hand thoughtfully across his brow, and, turning towards his friend, asks, somewhat irrelevantly,

'Did you receive a note from me yesterday, Grandby?'

'Yes, I did—certainly. It came at breakfast time. In it you told me you were going to Changla Gulli for the day. Did you have a good time of it?'

'Oh, pretty well—nothing much, though—nobody drunk! But I say, old chap, did you answer my letter?'

'Of course I did,' says Grandby, in some surprise. 'I wrote it about twelve. Do

you mean to say that that black scoundrel never delivered it?'

Loftus feels in his coat-pocket, and extracts a crumpled envelope from which he removes a letter, handing it to Grandby.

'Is that the letter you wrote?' he says, quietly.

Grandby opens it and reads it.

'Yes—certainly it is! Why should you doubt it?'

'Then it is true?'

'What is true?'

'Your engagement with Miss Forsdyke?'

'Yes, Loftus, it is quite true,' answers Grandby, with a flush of colour on his cheek. 'I authorise you to corroborate the report. I suppose that you are greatly surprised, are you not?'

'Oh, God—was ever man so cursed before!' says Loftus, falling forward with a groan; and then he looks up and says, quietly, 'Surprised!—no, I am not surprised—I expected it.'

'Expected it!' repeats Grandby, in astonishment. 'Then, Loftus, you must be a very clever fellow, for, till Sunday night

—the night I dined with you, you remember—the idea of matrimony had never entered into my head. Till that night I was firmly convinced that my love for her was strictly platonic. I was a young fool for imagining such a thing to be possible, and you, with your knowledge of the world, were quite right to ridicule the idea when I attempted to explain it; but believe me, Loftus, when I tell you that I had no other thought beyond fraternal friendship, when I first entered upon this clandestine intimacy with Miss Forsdyke.'

He speaks gravely and impressively, with the intention of clearing both his own character and that of Miss Forsdyke of any base suspicions that may be lurking in his friend's mind concerning them.

Loftus gives him a searching look, and nods his head assentingly.

'Yes, Grandby, I believe you,' he says, quietly. 'But how you could ever have embarked upon such an extraordinary undertaking I cannot comprehend. Where was your common-sense? What could you have been thinking of? Have your twenty-three years of life given you no knowledge of the weakness of the human

flesh? Would to God that you had taken some advice from some more experienced hand? Had you done so, all this misery would have been spared.'

'Misery!' cries Grandby, with a little laugh of half annoyance. 'What misery should I have been spared, I should like to know? You sit there, Loftus, as grave and preternatural as a judge, croaking like an old raven on subjects you know nothing about. My dear old boy, I am not *miserable*—I am mad with joy. I am going to marry the girl I love, and the girl who loves me. What more could any man desire in life?'

Loftus leans back in his chair and gives vent to a loud groan. At this moment he wishes himself anywhere else than in his present position. The task which he has before him is so utterly distasteful to him that he shrinks back appalled at the idea of having to complete it.

Grandby bursts into a hearty fit of laughter.

'My dear old chap,' he says, laying his hand upon his shoulder, 'you are indeed a Job's comforter. Instead of offering me your hearty congratulations, you sit by

my bedside grunting and groaning like a grampus with the stomach-ache. What is the matter, Loftus,'—he leans forward and eyes him curiously—'I am certain there is something more in this than meets the eye. As you have not come here to congratulate me, what is your reason for this morning visit? Are you in any difficulty, or what? You may rely on me to do my best to help you.'

'You would, wouldn't you?' he says, eagerly.

'Certainly, I would,' replies Grandby, promptly.

'And you would expect me to do the same for you?'

'Yes—I would,' answers Grandby, after a slight pause. 'I think that our friendship is sufficiently warm to expect so much from each other.'

'And you wouldn't be annoyed if I offered to help you?'

'Annoyed!—of course I shouldn't! How do you mean?'

'Well, supposing for instance you were beset by a great danger of which you were ignorant, and of which I was aware, would you be annoyed if I were to come forward

and explain to you the danger of your position.'

'My dear Loftus, how can you ask such an extraordinary question?' says Grandby, in unaffected astonishment. 'How could I possibly be annoyed if you were to come forward and disclose to me some hidden danger. I should be deeply grateful to you all my life—of course I should. But what on earth is the matter with you this morning? You are not yourself at all—you have only sworn mildly, and you have not invited me to spank you crimson once. Really, Loftus, I am quite alarmed about you—are you sure you are quite well?'

'Yes—I am quite well, old chap,' answers Loftus, fidgeting nervously in his chair. 'Don't you worry your head about me. You ask me why I came here this morning. Well—I will tell you. I came here to have from your own lips a confirmation of the report now circulating through Doonga as to your engagement with Miss Forsdyke. You see, Grandby, for your sister's dear sake, as well as for your own, I take a great interest in you, and I wish to know the whole truth.'

His voice suddenly falters and he turns

away. Grandby, deeply touched by the sudden tenderness in his tones, reaches forward and shakes him by the hand. The cynical and polished Loftus suddenly appearing in the *rôle* of sentimental friend has taken him completely by surprise.

'Thank you, Loftus,' he says, quietly. 'For a long time I have been conscious that you regard me as more than a casual acquaintance, and whether it is for my own sake or for Adelaide's, I do not know, nor do I care. You may be certain that I reciprocate the feeling. You ask me for particulars regarding my engagement to Miss Forsdyke, and I will give them to you without reserve, for the strength of your regard entitles you to that consideration. What is it that you wish to know?'

'I wish to know,' says Loftus, calmly, 'how it is that when last we spoke on this subject you were so particular in impressing on me that your affection for her was purely platonic, and that now, within a few days, I find you openly engaged to be married to her? How is it that the nature of your love for her has so suddenly changed?'

'It has not changed. Though uncon-

scious of it myself, it has been the same as it is now all along.'

'How was it then you discovered its true nature?'

'I will tell you. It was last Sunday—I met her as usual, fully convinced as to the platonism of my regard for her. I found her in a very nervous, excited state, and in the course of our conversation she suddenly fainted. It was then, at that moment of intense excitement, when I found myself bending over her senseless body, that I first became aware of the true nature of my feelings. I knew then that I loved her passionately with a strong man's love.'

'May I ask what you were talking about when she fainted?'

'You may—there is nothing private in the matter. I was telling her of poor Charlie's death'

'Of Charlie's death!' cries Loftus, leaning forward excitedly.

'Yes, of Charlie's death. There is nothing extraordinary in the circumstance—we were accustomed to discuss our respective relatives. I had always been diffident about speaking of poor Adelaide,

but, somehow upon this particular day, we got upon the subject, and I naturally referred to her husband's death.'

'And she fainted?'

'Yes, she fainted—but to connect the two circumstances together is of course absurd. She was in a very nervous state, and hysterical'

'Of course—of course!' says Loftus, quietly. 'And this was the first time, I suppose, that she knew of your relationship to poor Charlie?'

'Yes, certainly,' returns Grandby, with a little laugh. 'And not only that, but probably the first time that she had ever heard his name. Any more questions, old chap? You cannot complain of my being uncommunicative.'

'No—you are a regular brick, Grandby! I hope that I am not annoying you by this species of cross-examination. You see, I am so interested in the matter that I like to hear all details connected with it.'

'I am glad, beyond words, to hear you say so,' answers Grandby, warmly. 'Knowing that you dislike Miss Forsdyke, I was

afraid that you might be terribly put out when you heard the news. I wish that you would try to learn to like her.'

'Perhaps I may some day—there is no knowing,' says Loftus, absently. 'But I say, old chap—what happened then?'

'After she fainted?'

'Yes—after she fainted.'

'After some moments, she came to herself, and, with great difficulty, I carried her home. It was afterwards, on analysing my feelings, that I became aware of the true nature of my love for her.'

'And this was on Sunday?'

'Yes.'

'What—the night you dined with me?' cries Loftus, suddenly.

'Yes, that was the evening.'

'Ah!'

There is a world of covert meaning in the interjection. A sudden light has penetrated Loftus' brain, which has made clear to him a matter that hitherto has given him much perplexity. He now understands fully the motive-force which had induced Miss Forsdyke to make him that

mysterious midnight visit on that particular night.

'What do you mean?' says Grandby, eyeing him suspiciously.

'Oh! nothing,' answers Loftus, indifferently. 'It was on Sunday, was it? And did you see her again that night?'

'Only through the mist. She came on to the balcony, and dropped me down a little note, which told me she was better.'

'What time was that?'

'About half-past seven.'

'And you did not see her afterwards?'

'No.'

'You are certain, Grandby?'

'My dear chap, what do you mean by this systematic cross-examination?' cries Grandby, thoroughly mystified.

'I am afraid that I must seem very curious,' says Loftus, apologetically. 'I hope you don't think me impertinent. My only excuse lies in the great interest that I take in your engagement. And you are certain that you did not see her later on—I want to know all particulars, my dear Giovanni—Come, confess, did you not see her when you were returning home?'

'No, I didn't, but—Loftus, what do you mean?'

His voice suddenly changes from a tone of confident denial to one of startled enquiry. His mind has just recalled that figure which had appeared before him in the moonlight, as he had been returning home that night. An uncomfortable suspicion comes across him that Loftus is questioning him with a purpose.

'What do you mean?' he says, slowly.

'I only mean what I say,' says Loftus, quietly. 'I ask you, whether you did not see Miss Forsdyke later on in the evening on that particular Sunday. What is the matter, old chap? You look quite scared.'

Grandby gives vent to a nervous little laugh.

'Well, I confess, I am feeling a little scared,' he says, vainly attempting to speak at his ease. 'Your curious question has reminded me of an extraordinary hallucination I had that night. Really it was not to be wondered at, considering the lamentable state in which you sent me home.'

'An hallucination!—what was it?'

'Well, you must promise not to laugh. I was toiling up the hill past the church, with my eyes upon the ground, when suddenly looking up I could have sworn that I saw Diana—Miss Forsdyke before me. I made a rush towards her, and fell flat down. The force of my fall sobered me a bit, I can tell you—and of course there was nothing to be seen, when I picked myself up. It had been an hallucination—but it was a very vivid one.'

'It was no hallucination,' says Loftus, calmly.

'What—what do you mean?'

'I repeat,' says Loftus, impressively, 'it was no hallucination.'

For a moment there is a dead silence, the two men looking fixedly into one another's eyes; and then suddenly Loftus turns round towards the bed, and lays his hand on Grandby's arm.

'Grandby, old boy,' he says, and there is a noticeable tremor in his voice, 'I have something very serious to say to you. Come what may, I must say it, and yet I do not know how to say it. You see, when certain subjects are discussed,' he

continues, after a slight pause, 'you become excessively hot-tempered. It is not much over a fortnight ago since we had what might have been a very serious quarrel over certain words I let drop in all good faith. Now I do not wish that that should occur again. I wish you to receive what I say to you in the same kindly spirit as I offer it.'

Grandby takes him by the hand, and shakes it.

'No one has regretted more than I,' he says, 'my lamentable display of temper on that day. I can safely assure you that it will never occur again, for I feel certain that you will never purposely try to annoy me. If you have anything disagreeable to say to me, say it, by all means, for I am sure that you are actuated by a sense of duty, and not by any desire to make yourself unpleasant.'

He speaks the words bravely, looking his friend full in the face, but at the same time he is aware of a sudden sinking of the heart, as with the dread of the approach of some great danger. The extraordinary change which he notices in

Loftus' whole demeanour, fills him with a vague foreboding that his friend has something very painful on his mind.

'I cannot tell you how glad I am to hear you say so,' answers Loftus, in a relieved tone. 'I have a most unpleasant task before me, and the knowledge that you will receive it in a proper spirit lightens it considerably. God knows how willingly I would be anywhere but here! Grandby, old boy, it devolves on me to tell you how shamefully you have been deceived.'

'I do not understand you,' says Grandby, now thoroughly impressed by the earnestness of Loftus' manner.

'I wish to God you did understand me,' cries Loftus, miserably. 'It would save me the painful task of explaining what I mean. I repeat—you have been shamefully deceived. You may remember having a short conversation with me one evening, when I was bidding you goodnight. You tried to extract from me a promise never to allude again to Miss Forsdyke. If you remember, I promised to respect your wish, but I reserved to myself the right to violate my promise if an

occasion of sufficient gravity to warrant such a course should present itself. That occasion has now come, and I claim to myself that right—in fact, I may say I made that reservation, foreseeing the likelihood of this very occasion presenting itself.'

There is a short silence, and then Grandby suddenly stretches out his hand and seizes his friend nervously by the arm.

'What do you mean?' he cries, hurriedly. 'Tell me what you mean. Is this all a gigantic jest, got up to frighten me, or are you really earnest in what you are saying?'

'What I am going to say to you, Grandby, is the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God!' says Loftus, solemnly. 'And, dear old chap, it will be a blow to you—I know it will—you will want all your manly strength and courage to withstand it.'

'Go on, Loftus, for the love of God!' cries Grandby, quickly. 'This suspense is killing me.'

There is a slight pallor on his face, as he leans forward in breathless anxiety, waiting for his friend to speak. Loftus,

with a prefatory cough of embarrassment commences his unwelcome task. 'You have noticed, I know,' he says, slowly, 'that I have never been favourably inclined towards Miss Forsdyke. In fact, you have accused me more than once of showing her spite and malice. Now, Grandby, has it ever struck you that I might have a reason for disliking her?'

'Yes—it has,' returns Grandby, quickly, 'Miss Forsdyke herself has told me the reason of your dislike to her. You were great friends once, she said, and you took some liberty with her which she resented.'

'What!' cries Loftus, falling back in sheer amazement.

'Just what I say,' replies Grandby, coldly. 'You took some liberty with her which she did not specify, and she resented it.'

'And you believed it?' cries Loftus, gazing incredulously towards his friend.

'Naturally I believed it,' answers Grandby, haughtily; 'she is my promised wife.'

He speaks these words so simply and with such a ring of perfect faith in the integrity of his betrothed, that Loftus, hearing him, slightly pales. He understands

that the task before him is one of appalling magnitude.

'You were deceived,' he says, quickly. 'There is not one word of truth in the story from beginning to end—it is a gross fabrication. I never was a friend of Miss Forsdyke's, and I never gave her the opportunity to resent a liberty. When I first met her she was bowed down to the dust, and I saved her from a fate too terrible to imagine. It was then that I had the opportunity of studying her real character—and it was then that I took a dislike to her. Far from our ever having been friends, I tell you that I, as an honest man, have disliked her from the very first.'

'Loftus,' says Grandby, vainly attempting to steady his voice. 'I have promised to keep my temper as long as you speak to me in a kindly spirit. It seems to me that you are now actuated'

'I *am* speaking to you in a kindly spirit,' he interposes, hastily. 'It is the great interest that I take in your welfare which makes me undergo the extreme unpleasantness of my present position. Grandby, dear old boy, listen to me. You have been terriby deceived. The girl to whom you

have engaged yourself, whom you deem so pure and innocent, is an adventuress—a low intriguist—a woman not worthy to look you in the face. Believe me'

'I will *not* believe you!' cries Grandby, passionately, with a face pale as death. 'How dare you, Loftus, speak like that to me of my promised wife!'

With a low groan Loftus falls back in his chair and covers his face with his hands. Never does he remember to have been placed in such a truly awful position before. The task which he has before him is one of such extreme difficulty that even *his* consummate tact and *finesse* fail before it. For the space of several minutes neither speaks. Loftus is the first to break the silence. Removing his hands, he looks into his friend's agitated face, and says, slowly,

'Grandby, old boy, you must solemnly promise me to keep your temper. What I have to say must be said, even though you kill me on the spot for saying it. Hear me to the end without interruption—that is all I ask. Let me finish my task—let me do my duty—and then I will go. You need not believe me—you may deliberately

disbelieve me—you may cut me for ever afterwards—but'

'I will,' says Grandby, in a hoarse whisper. 'Speak out what you have to say, and say it as quickly as possible—and I will try to guard my tongue and temper.'

'Thank you, old chap,' answers Loftus, in faltering tones. 'I will be brief and to the point. I find you engaged to Miss Forsdyke, imagining her to be exactly what she seems. I happen to know of an episode in Miss Forsdyke's life of which you are probably ignorant, and for your own sake, as well as for your sister's, I feel it my bounden duty to tell it you, for when you hear it I feel certain that your love will turn to hate—you will regard her with scorn and loathing.'

'Never!' says Grandby, firmly between his teeth, his face utterly destitute of colour. 'I defy you—do your worst!'

'It is not a question of doing my worst, nor of defiance,' says Loftus, sadly. 'I merely intend to do my duty by telling the exact truth. I want you to cast your thoughts back to a certain day when you came to me and asked for information concerning your brother-in-law's death. I do

not doubt that you remember every word I said—I explained to you all the facts in detail.'

'You did, Loftus,' says Grandby, in a softened voice. 'You played a truly noble part which I do not forget.'

'Then trust me as a friend,' says Loftus, with a sudden tenderness, taking his reluctant hand in his. 'Do not regard me as your enemy—believe me, I am acting now solely for your good. Do you remember, Grandby, how poor Charlie came by his death?'

'I do,' he says, his voice falling to a subdued whisper.

'Tell me, and let me see whether you have forgotten any of the circumstances connected with that death.'

'I have forgotten none,' says Grandby, sadly. 'He was dared to pick a flower growing over a precipice, and, accepting the challenge, he fell, and was smashed to pieces on the cruel rocks below. Alas! poor Charlie!'

'It is indeed so,' murmurs Loftus. 'But for that mad venture, we should have him here beside us now.'

'We should, Loftus—curse her!'

'Curse *whom?*' asks Loftus, quietly.

'That fair wretch who brought him to his ruin. But for that shameless, wanton woman, Charlie Talbot would now be still alive.'

Loftus rises to his feet and sinks down upon his knees beside the bedside of his friend.

'Grandby—Frank!' he says, in an agitated voice, taking him by the hand, 'that shameless, wanton woman is now your promised wife!'

CHAPTER XI.

SERVABO FIDEM!

For a moment there is a dead silence. The two men gaze into each other's face as though suddenly changed to stone. Pale, rigid, contorted, stunned by the suddenness of the awful news, Grandby remains motionless, incapable of uttering a single sound—and then, with a fierce movement, he disengages his hand, and falls back on his pillow with a low moan of agony, his face covered in his hands.

'Loftus,' he whispers, hoarsely, 'is this all a jest? Tell me that it is not true?'

'Would to God I could!' says Loftus, fervently, bending over him, his face disclosing plainly his great distress of mind. 'But I cannot—unless I tell a lie. I came

here with the express purpose of saying it, and now I repeat it—the girl who was poor Charlie's mistress and who was instrumental in his death is one and the same with your promised wife.'

'It is not true—it is a vile lie!'—he starts up fiercely, with a look of mad defiance on his face. 'From the very first, hating her, you have tried to injure her in my opinion—you have slandered her—persecuted her.—Ah! God, what am I saying?—Try to forgive me, Loftus, for this ingratitude—my brain seems all on fire—I feel that I am going mad!'

He falls back again upon the pillow with a low groan. In spite of the great love he bears the girl, in spite of the perfect faith he has in her integrity and honour, he cannot stifle the consciousness that Loftus must be indeed speaking the truth—that there cannot possibly exist any motive for the concoction of such a gigantic lie.

'You have a perfect right to doubt my statement,' says Loftus, sadly. 'I come to you and bring an aspersion of the gravest character against your promised wife. It is only fair that you should demand some proof. Sitting here alone with you I

can give no proof, but, if you so wish it, I will accuse her of it in your presence, and I defy her to deny it. But, even here, I may recall to your memory certain little incidents which you have probably forgotten, which will go far to establish what I say. May I do this?'

Without removing his hands from before his face, Grandby makes a nervous gesture of assent.

'Well, in the first place,' says Loftus, quietly, 'I must remind you of the peculiar life Miss Forsdyke leads. Only on very rare occasions is she allowed to take part in social gaieties—she is, in fact, if you consider the case, more or less a slave in her own house. She is allowed to make no acquaintances, to speak to no one save in the presence of her aunt, to exercise no free will or judgment of her own. Now, you must admit that such a position is peculiar, and that there must exist some reason for it.'

'It only shows that she is a suffering martyr,' says Grandby, quickly. 'I know all this—she has told it to me herself. Her home is unhappy and unsympathetic,

antagonistic and cruel, and she deserves pity, not condemnation.'

'To an outsider it may appear in that light—but I, who know the facts of the case exactly, view the matter differently. She is treated in this seemingly harsh manner under her own father's orders—for in Colonel Forsdyke's opinion she is not to be trusted out of sight. There was a time when he loved the very ground on which she walked—he worshipped her, and denied her nothing in the world. But his love for her received a shock, so awful in its suddenness and character, that it crumbled away, and the last three years have not been sufficient to build it up again. No one knows Miss Forsdyke's true character better than her own father, and it is on account of the perfectness of his knowledge that her freedom is so restrained.'

'Go on!' the voice comes quick and short, with a sudden gasp, as though he were vainly attempting to stifle a rising sob. The calm, impressive tones of Loftus, so directly different from his usual style, carry a sense of conviction to that quiver-

ing heart which he finds it vain for him to attempt to fight against.

'Do you remember the club dance?' says Loftus, quietly, steadying his voice with an effort as he looks upon the stricken figure beside him. 'Do you remember my suddenly appearing before Miss Forsdyke? I think you do; because you mentioned to me afterwards, as a kind of joke, that you had foolishly imagined that she had suddenly paled, as though with fear. It was no freak of your imagination—it was the exact truth—Miss Forsdyke did turn pale as death when I appeared before her. And why?—simply because she feared me! And why did she fear me?—because she knew that she was in my power! That was the first time I had ever addressed her since that day, three years before, when I brought her back to her father in this very place. Have you forgotten the incident?'

'No, I have not forgotten it,' he murmurs, hoarsely. 'I remember it exactly. Have you anything more to say?'

'Yes—there are many points of cir-

cumstantial evidence which I can lay before you. By your own words this morning you have confessed that Miss Forsdyke fainted on your mentioning your close relationship to Charlie Talbot. Does not that fact give colour to my accusation? Can you doubt me longer when I tell you that that very night, actuated by a wild fear for the insecurity of her position, she braved all risk and came to my room in the small hours of the night, and begged me to swear never to disclose her secret to any mortal soul.'

'Ah! then it was she herself I saw!'

'It was. She came to me with tears and protestations, imploring me never to divulge the secret of her sin to you, Frank Grandby. She said that she loved you fondly in a *pure*, *platonic* way, and that she could not bear to think that possibly I might step in between you, and turn your love to hate. And I refused to bind myself to any promise—her secret, I told her, was quite safe in my keeping, without my going through the form of oath. I told her that for all I cared she might love you in any way she liked—

that, as long as she did you no harm, I should never interfere. And I would have done so, dear old boy! As long as you confined yourself to flirtation, innocent or guilty, it mattered not to me, and I never said a word, except to occasionally warn you of the danger of your position. But when I heard that you were actually engaged to her I hurried up here post-haste to tell you all—for in consenting to marry you she has done you a grievous harm. Do you understand me, dear old boy? Had it been any other man on earth, I should not have interfered at all—it would have been no business of mine. It is not my wish to injure *her*, but to preserve *you*, for you are the brother of Charlie's wife.'

He makes no answer—he lies there, with his face buried in his hands, a prey to his own great grief. All doubt as to the accuracy of Loftus' statement has now deserted him; with the suddenness of an overwhelming avalanche, he has become aware that his betrothed—the girl in whom he has held such a perfect trust—is a totally different being from what he has imagined.

She has deceived him—in Loftus' words, *shamefully* deceived him—deceived him from the very first. Her purity and goodness, the unhappiness of her home, the sadness of her life, her craving for love and sympathy, have all been parts in one great systematic deception, and he has blindly and trustingly believed in her, and on this false understanding has she, through the shallow pretence of a platonic friendship, stolen from him the most priceless jewel of his budding manhood—his loyal love. Ah, yes, his love; for, in spite of everything, he knows that he loves her still.

Love—man's strong love for woman—cannot be uprooted in a day, for it is a force utterly uncontrollable by the human mind. Like a crawling serpent, it creeps insidiously upon its prey, and then with a spring it leaps and seizes its unconscious victim in its winding coils, and no earthly power is strong enough to extricate the body from its fierce embrace. The brain may try, may devise all manner of methods of escape, but it will fail. The power of the serpent-love is far too strong. It

cares nought for the human brain, the human inclination—it only minds its own desire; and there it clings, crushing body and mind, and paralysing the senses; and there it stays, till, satiated, it unwinds itself, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, and disappears.

'That was the night on which you dined with me,' continues Loftus, quietly. 'On returning home, you fancied you saw an apparition. It was no apparition—it was Miss Forsdyke in flesh and blood, coming to pay me that midnight visit. Shall I continue further? Shall I point out to you all the thousand little things which you in your great blindness overlooked, or are you now convinced?'

No answer—merely a convulsive shiver of the body.

'There is another point which I may mention,' says Loftus, with a perceptible quiver in his voice—for even his hardened heart is unable to resist the wild surge of pity which assails it as he looks on the form of the man before him—'and it is a point on which, though only based on surmise, I feel quite convinced. You have

often spoken to me concerning those mysterious wreaths of flowers which appear on your sister's grave—I have not the slightest doubt that the hand which put them there was Miss Forsdyke's.'

'Diana's!' he cries, starting up in sheer amazement.

'Yes, Diana's. You may remember that you were once indignant with me for stating that I saw Miss Forsdyke near the cemetery on the day on which the old wreaths were replaced by new ones. Although I was certain of the fact, I did not press the point, for I saw it was disagreeable to you; but still'

'My sister's grave!—but—but what motive'

'What motive, do you ask? If you believe my statement regarding her, her motive will become apparent. If it is true that she was instrumental in his death, it is not hard to understand why she tends his grave. The motive-power in her case is a remorseful conscience.'

'Then she is good at heart!' he cries, with a look of wild eagerness on his pain-

stricken face. 'She must have repented of her former sin.'

'Yes, I have no doubt she has,' returns Loftus, gravely. 'In fact, I am certain of the same—at least, as far as concerns her share in Talbot's death. Whether her morality is of a different character now, I cannot say. If you remember, when I told you the story of his death, I impressed upon you that she was to be pitied rather than blamed—that it was accidental, resulting from a mere caprice on her part. Yes, Grandby, I am convinced that she has expiated that sin in years of bitter remorse. The fact of her horror for the part she played in that tragic drama is palpable when you consider that she fainted at the mere mention of his name.'

'I knew it—I knew it!' he cries, in the same eager voice. 'She has repented thoroughly of all her former wickedness—I could have sworn that she was good. What she was three years ago I do not know—I do not care. I only see her as she is—as she is to me—and to me she is good, and pure, and lovable, and worthy to be any honourable man's wife. I thank you, Loftus, for your kindness in having

come and told me this,' he adds, in a calmer tone, turning to his friend. 'I can well understand how distasteful the task must have been to you, and I appreciate strongly the affectionate motive which prompted you to do it. Believe me, I will never forget it.'

He holds out his hand, and Loftus, with a look of the blankest amazement on his face, mechanically seizes it in his grip. He hardly can believe his ears. Is it possible that he has heard aright—or is he mad—or dreaming?

'Grandby — Frank — what do you mean?'

'I mean what I say,' replies Grandby, firmly. 'You have acted the part of a true friend in coming to disclose to me these particulars, but your disclosure does not shake me one atom in my original resolve. I shall see Miss Forsdyke this afternoon, and I shall tell her all I know, and, if she still consents to be my wife, I shall marry her. My sense of charity is too great to condemn any woman for a sin which she has committed years ago—and this girl in particular, for I love her purely and passionately well, and my love

for her tells me that, whatever may be the crime which she has committed in past years, she has amply expiated for it in years of repentance and remorse.'

Loftus, with a sudden movement, springs to his feet, and gazes at his friend in incredulous horror. For the moment he really fancies that the shock has partially deprived him of his senses, but one look into the depth of those dark blue eyes, regarding him sorrowfully from out of the pale, grave face, convinces him of his error. He sees that Grandby is terribly in earnest, and is speaking from the bottom of his heart.

'Ah! it is impossible!' he cries, unable to credit his senses. 'I can't believe you. You cannot mean to marry her, after what you know regarding her.'

'But I do intend to do so, all the same,' replies Grandby, quietly and impressively. 'Do you know anything against Miss Forsdyke, except this one youthful folly?'

'No—nothing.'

'And you, yourself, admit that she has suffered true repentance for her sin?'

'Yes—as far as I can judge.'

'Then, why is it impossible for me to

marry her? Is a woman's whole life to be blasted on account of one false step? Are years of repentance to be considered as nought in comparison with the gravity of her offence? Is a woman to be condemned for ever, for doing that which in a man is regarded either with indifference or concealed admiration? No, Loftus, if that is your idea of charity—it is not mine. If she will marry me, knowing that I am aware of her dishonour, then she shall be my wife. You look surprised—but I can solemnly assure you that I mean it.'

Loftus takes three or four hasty paces up and down the room. Such a determination as this seems to him nothing short of sheer insanity.

'But you must not—it is impossible—you'

'Not another word upon the subject, if you please,' says Grandby, quietly, holding up his hand. He is astonished, himself, at his own calmness—in one moment all the weakness and irresolution of his character seem to have been swept away by the force of the new strength which permeates his frame. 'You have done me

to-day a noble act of friendship, and I thank you for the same.'

'You bear me no grudge—no enmity?' says Loftus, slowly, awed in spite of himself at the calm majesty of his friend's tones.

'I thank you most heartily from the bottom of my heart. After to-day, come what may, it will be impossible for me ever to think of you otherwise than in a tender spirit. Shake hands, old chap—good-bye for the present—we will meet again soon, and I will let you know how matters progress with regard to this affair.'

Loftus mechanically shakes him by the hand, too amazed to speak, and without a word he turns round and leaves the house closing the door behind him.

He passes through the gardens, and out on the road, lost in the deepest thought, and it is not until he has arrived opposite the post-office that his thoughts find expression in words. There he suddenly stops, and, placing his hands upon his hips, he looks up at the sky, and addresses space.

'Well!!!' he says, with a sudden energy,

'if he isn't the rummest cove on this benighted earth, you—you—you may split my windpipe with a muricated tomahawk!' with which forcible ejaculation he continues his way in the direction of the club, his mind resembling one great chaos of bewilderment and doubt.

CHAPTER XII.

GRANDBY'S DECISION.

GRANDBY falls back on his pillow, and covers his face with his hands. A cautious rap at the door is heard, followed by its slowly opening, and his servant noiselessly glides across the room, and salaams.

'Will the sahib get up—it is past ten o'clock?'

No—the sahib will not get up! He motions him to the door, telling him to return in an hour's time.

'Does the sahib require that *chota haziri* should be brought?'

'I want nothing—go!' cries the sahib, imperiously. 'Bring me my water at eleven.'

The door closes on the obsequious

oriental, and Grandby falls back with a sigh of great relief. He wants to be alone—he wants to *think*.

The shock which he has received, on hearing of the frailty of his betrothed, has been of a sobering character. Except for that one wild outburst of defiance, apologised for as soon as uttered, he has evinced no marked degree of excitability. The awful nature of Loftus' information regarding Diana Forsdyke has disclosed to him the utter unreliability of his own impressions, and the knowledge that his perceptive faculty has been so defective as to have led him smiling and confident to the very edge of a treacherous pitfall, has filled him with a sense of awe which calms his quickening pulse, and keeps in check the glowing fever in his brain.

It had been a rude awakening. Full of assurance as to the correctness of his own judgment in the estimate of her character, he had fondly imagined her to be the type of everything good on earth—he had fancied that he had known intimately and exactly her inward self—he had regarded her in the light of a suffering angel,—a creature of high sensibilities, misunder-

stood and misused accordingly by the cold, unsympathetic world in which she moved, —a being to whom sin and crime were quantities unknown. Never for one moment could he have deemed it possible that she was concealing within her breast the memory of that heinous crime which has disgraced her past years. He had believed in her implicitly; he had trusted her lovingly and perfectly; he had been ready to swear that she was exactly what she seemed, a being clean and white as a winter lily, a falling flake of snow, a Himalayan crest—in fact, the very personification of purity and innocence.

Yes, indeed—it has been a rude awakening. Not for one moment does he doubt the genuineness of Loftus' statement regarding his betrothed. Apart from the mass of circumstantial evidence brought against her by his friend, intuitively he feels that the acccusation contains nothing but the truth. Now that the scales have fallen from his eyes, and she no longer appears before him as the incarnation of maiden purity, numerous little incidents rise before him, bearing now a totally

different complexion to what they did before. All that was mysterious in her character—her confusions, her hesitations, her tremblings, her sudden fears—now become to him as clear as day. What he had formerly regarded as the effects of a highly-strung, nervous temperament, now he perceives to have been merely the natural embarrassment resulting from the concealment of a terrible secret. Dagon, the great god, has fallen from his high estate, and that which he has fondly imagined to be priceless marble has shown itself to be but common clay.

But as with the Philistines of old, so with him now. Though Dagon fell, so that his head and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold, only his bare stump remaining, although he was thus mutilated, destroyed of all the attributes of godhead, they tenderly and reverentially took him and set him in his place again. Though they had seen him debased, humbled, smashed upon the ground, their old feeling of reverence for him was too strong to be eradicated from their hearts. Knowing him to be but

brittle stone, they took him and set him in his place again, and worshipped him blindly as before. Association, tradition, habit were all too strong to allow them to thrust him forth from their mentally-contracted lives and to reject him at his proper value.

Yes—he is conscious of the fact ; he knows that he loves her all the same, although the marble has turned to common clay. It was the figure, and not the material of its composition, which he has loved, and, in spite of the severe shock which his heart has received on the discovery of his illusion, he is totally incapable of eradicating from its midst that feeling of passionate tenderness which he has conceived for her. Ashamed, humbled, degraded to the dust in his own estimation, in having to admit the fact of his moral debasement, still he finds himself powerless to turn his love to hate. Before the fierce power of his love, conscience, requirement of self-respect, demand of honour, better judgment, all dwindle down to nothingness. As the infant's castle on the sand vanishes beneath the mighty progress of the ocean wave, so melt the calm

dictates of moral inclination before the fiery cyclone of the human heart.

What is he to do? What is to be his line of action? What is to be his final decision—for the decision he makes must be indeed final? There must be no indecision, no irresolution, no half-measures—he must either take her or reject her!

Lying in bed, with that wonderful boyish countenance of his pale and torn with the fierce workings of a man's passion, the question which he has propounded to Loftus rings in his ears with ceaseless reiteration: Are years of repentance to be considered as nought in comparison with the gravity of one's sin? Is a human being's whole life to be irrevocably blasted on account of one false step?

No—a thousand times no! How can Christian charity enunciate such a truly unchristian principle? Ah! what a terribly awful contemplation! A whole life ruined by one youthful indiscretion, and no power on earth strong enough to grant another life in which the ruined wretch may find such earthly happiness as it is the right of every human creature, however humble, to enjoy! Gone—gone—gone like the mist

before the sun—the smoke before the wind —gone like the report of some great gun, rolling onward into space never to he heard again throughout the eternity of time!

He covers his face with his hands and shudders. All the charity of his chivalrous manhood rises, fierce and white with indignation, to protest against such hideous cruelty.

'Never,' he cries. 'Such things cannot surely be in this Christian world! Ah! what a spectacle! Charity, pity, mercy trodden down and trampled out of sight by envy, hatred, malice!'

There can be but one answer to his proposition. If a being fully and truly repents the committal of a sin, forgiveness becomes more than his due—it is his right. Such is the very essence of the Christian doctrine.

'Who am I to set myself up to judge her for her sin?' he murmurs sadly to himself. 'Am I myself immaculate? Am I a God? If she has repented, what right have I to withhold from her the forgiveness she has earned?'

He casts his thoughts towards the

character of her sin. She has failed in that respect which in a woman is considered by the world the most heinous of all failings—she has committed the one sin which society will never pardon. Why should this be so? Thinking deeply, he cannot say.

To his clear sense of justice, it seems grotesque that what applies to women should not equally apply to men. Surely, he argues to himself, it is not too much to expect to find a certain consistency in the formation and application of social laws. If the law of society demands that women who have once fallen should be universally shunned and totally condemned, why should it be more lenient to men who have similarly offended. Why should there be this marked distinction in favour of the male sex? By what right has it obtained this exclusive and peculiar privilege? Or vice versâ, if in men breach of morals be regarded with indifference why should not women be also treated in the same clement manner?

To Grandby, now lying in bed, such a state of affairs appears to be so hideously

unjust that he can barely believe that it actually does exist in the centre of a world priding itself on its freedom, culture, equity, and advanced civilisation. But, that it does exist he is only too well aware, although he has never before recognised the fact until this moment when he finds himself face to face with it, standing before him like some gaunt spectre, grinning ghastliness and shame, impossible to pass unnoticed. Laws for men, and laws for women!

Alas! what a gangrene sore—what a cancerous wound festering in the very heart of the social world, and corroding all that is good and right and charitable! And with what result? See—look—judge for yourselves, and what a piteous farce, what a sad burlesque, what a sorry pantomine is revealed to your astonished eyes! The strange anomaly of a state of life, where men and women each possess their respective standards of morality!

'Have I, myself, never fallen in this respect?' he murmurs to himself, following rapidly up his train of thought. 'Have I never been guilty of this offence? Can I

say honestly, truthfully, from the bottom of my heart, that I am pure in this particular? No, I cannot—I have sinned not once, not twice, not even a dozen times—I have sinned so often that I have lost all count—and yet I am received in society as though it had never happened. And it is not because society is ignorant of the fact. They know it, though I have never told them so. They do not require to be told, for they accept it in me, being a man, as a matter of course. And no one thinks the worse of me for having done it—in fact, some men view it with pride and complacency, instead of shame. Then why should she, for having fallen *once*, be placed outside the pale of all that is pure and good? Why should she be regarded as a thing of wickedness and contamination, a thing to shun and shudder at? Why should she be treated in this cruel and fearful way, when my delinquencies are ignored? No—no—my God, I thank Thee for having placed me above the conventional blindness of the social world! She has sinned, and so have I—therefore, if I be not her inferior, we stand upon a

true equality. It is not for me to cast the stone. It is not a question of innate wickedness and depravity, for my little darling is neither wicked nor depraved by nature. It is merely a question of moral weakness. Under the influence of some great passion, she has yielded to temptation. Years have passed since that fatal time—years of wild bitterness and remorse. Is she then to be condemned? No—a hundred, thousand times no! How can one, in the possession of an immortal soul, bring oneself to mete out such gross injustice? Who can estimate the strength of the temptation which assailed her—and how can those, who have never been so assailed, dare to condemn her for having fallen?'

A smile of exquisite tenderness overspreads his face, and he raises his head from his pillow, and leans upon his arm, gazing fixedly before him as in a trance.

'Ah, Diana—my little love—my darling!' he murmurs softly to himself; 'only assure me, with your own lips, that you are pure, that you have repented of your

former sin, and I will take you in my arms and shelter you from all future harm with the power of my love!'

CHAPTER XIII.

A NOBLE FORGIVENESS AND ITS REQUITAL.

The knowledge of the great sin in Diana's past life causes Grandby to view his approaching interview with her father in quite a different light. Before he was aware of that dark blot resting on the fairness of her name, the thought of his confession had caused him not a little anxiety. He was unable to conceal from himself the fact that the part which he had played in the affair bore a most uncommonly suspicious appearance, and he had dreaded to think how the colonel might receive the news.

But this feeling of trepidation disappears on the discovery of that closed leaf in Diana's past. He becomes at once

aware that the colonel, himself cognisant of the slur on his daughter's name, will not be in a position to subject his conduct to a severe criticism when he hears his honourable proposal of marriage.

So it is with a feeling of confidence in the result of his visit that he taps at Mrs. Renfrew's door an hour after lunch.

Mrs. Renfrew rises to meet him as he enters, extending to him her hand with an air of gracious affability.

'Good-afternoon, Mr. Grandby,' she says, 'I am very glad to see you—pray be seated—I think you are a little late. Diana is in the inner room—she has been very upset to-day by her father's visit. It seems to me, between ourselves, Mr. Grandby, that he is very incensed at the whole affair. On his arrival they had a long interview together, and she came out crying, in a most excited state, and from what she said I gathered that her father would have nothing to say to the matter.'

'I hope not,' says Grandby, blankly. 'Surely she must be mistaken. I am well aware that my conduct is open to violent criticism. I ought never to have allowed

myself to enter upon a clandestine intimacy with your niece. But, my dear Mrs. Renfrew, you *must* be well aware that my intentions have never been otherwise than honourable. From the very first, I have never held a thought towards Diana that was not upright and pure.'

'On that point I feel quite certain, Mr. Grandby,' she answers, confidently. 'I pride myself rather on being a physiognomist—and, judging from your face, I do not believe you to be capable of deliberately doing wrong. From the first moment I saw you I took a liking to you, and I am sure you have my best wishes for your success. What my brother's objections are I do not know. I suppose, after all, it is but natural that he should be put out with the whole affair.'

'But where is the colonel?' cries Grandby. 'Let me see him, and plead my own cause. Conscious as I am of having done nothing radically wrong, I do not see why he should object to have me for a son-in-law. The happiness of two lives are dependent on his consent. It is true,' he adds, bitterly, 'that I am very

poor, and not in a position to offer his daughter a fitting home.'

'Such a consideration would bear no weight whatever with my brother,' answers Mrs. Renfrew, with calm dignity. 'In discussing ways and means, you appear to forget that Diana is an only child, and as such will probably obtain a fair allowance, sufficient, at any rate, to enable you to set up house, if not luxuriously, at least comfortably. Colonel Forsdyke is at present taking some fresh air. He appeared terribly agitated, ate no lunch, and scarcely spoke a word—Diana was in tears—in fact, it has been a very trying day for me with my weak nerves. I think, if you will excuse me, I will go and lie down. I will send Diana to keep you company, and you had better wait till the colonel returns—he won't be long.'

As she speaks she sprinkles her handkerchief with *eau-de-Cologne* and passes it wearily across her brow. To look at her at this moment, one would have thought that all the cares of a great nation were on her shoulders. With an effort she

rises from the sofa. Grandby picks up her shawl from the floor, and hands it to her. She thanks him with a faint smile, and passes into the next room.

In another moment Diana is standing in the doorway, and an involuntary exclamation of horror escapes him as he gazes on her pale, tear-stained face. Careworn, haggard, of a deadly pallor, with large, black rims encircling her swollen eyes, it seems as though ten years had passed since last he looked upon her face. In a moment everything is forgotten beyond the fact that he loves her, that she is more precious to him than all the world. He advances hastily towards her with the intention of taking her in his arms, but with a sudden movement she stops his action.

'Keep back!' she cries, in hoarse, discordant tones. 'You must not speak to me—you must not touch me—you must not look upon my face again—we must be strangers to one another for evermore. But, Frank—my love—my darling,'—her voice changes to a despairing cry, and she sinks down at his feet, gazing up at him with a face of agonised entreaty—'try—

try not to think harshly of me in the future. My love for you was always pure and true—remember that—always try to remember that.'

He gently takes her in his arms, and lifts her from the ground, and places her in the low arm-chair beside the fire. Then he kisses her softly on the forehead, and kneels down beside her, and takes her hand in his. Well does he understand the reason of her agitation.

'Hush, Diana!' he says, in soothing tones of loving tenderness. 'Tell me what you mean. Why should we be strangers for evermore? Why should we not follow the dictates of our love, and become to one another man and wife?'

A sob escapes her, and she throws her arms around his neck with a passionate *abandon.*

'I cannot tell you,' she whispers, hoarsely. 'I have deceived you, and I dare not tell you the story of my shame. Let me say good-bye to you now for ever—let me look into those wondrous, speaking eyes of yours once more, and read their tale of love; for it is the last time—the very last time on earth. You must never come back

to me again,' she continues, with a choking gasp of painful emotion—'never—*never*—ah! think exactly what that cruel word means—you must never come back to me to disclose your scorn and loathing,—for I wish to remember you always in the future—ah! my God, the future!—what will the future be to me?—as you are, as you always have been, as I have learned to love you, and not as you will be in one short hour's time, when you have seen my father.'

A swelling sensation arises in his throat, and he folds his arms around her, straining her to his breast. Such is the intensity of his emotion that for several moments he finds himself incapable of articulating a syllable, and then, with a violent effort, he controls himself. Disengaging himself from her embrace, he looks her steadily in the face.

'Diana, my little darling,' he says, gently, 'I do not fear my interview with your father, nor need you. He can tell me nothing concerning you which I do not know already—he can tell me nothing which can alter the great love I bear you. Diana, I know all—I know every circum-

stance connected with the hideous secret of your life.'

For a moment there is silence, the two looking into each other's eyes, each striving to penetrate the thoughts concealed within, and then she breaks forth into a laugh of wild, hysterical emotion.

'You know nothing, Frank—nothing—nothing!' she cries. 'Did you do so, you would not now be here; you would not touch me with your finger, for fear of lasting contamination.'

He takes both her hands in his and looks her fixedly in the face.

'Diana,' he says, earnestly, 'I repeat, I know everything, and yet I am here, kneeling at your feet. Such a love as mine cannot be killed with a sudden blow. Perhaps you will believe me when I tell you that, on awaking this morning, I found Mr. Loftus'

'Mr. Loftus! Ah!'

'Yes, Mr. Loftus. Now, Diana, you understand. He has told me all—he has disclosed to me the whole story of your sin.'

'Told you all!' she murmurs, mechanically, gazing at him with horror-stricken

eyes. 'Ah! it is impossible; and you are here—Frank, Frank, what do you mean?'

'This is what I mean,' he says, drawing her closer towards him. 'I mean that my love for you is as strong as ever; I mean that it is not for me to judge you for your sin; I mean that I only want an assurance from your own lips that you have wholly repented of your sin, and it shall be blotted out—it shall be as though it had never been—I will take you as my wife, and shelter you with my life.'

A sound of passionate sobbing breaks forth from the unhappy girl, and she throws herself forward on his neck.

'Tell me, Diana,' he whispers, 'have you wholly repented of your sin? Assure me with your own lips that you are now pure and good, that you look back with horror on the error of your youth—tell me that you have nothing further on your mind—lay bare to me your heart—let me see into its hidden depths—let me assure myself that you are what I deem you to be, a girl who has sinned, and suffered, and repented.'

'I have,' she whispers, hoarsely, between

her sobs—'I have. Frank, I am not worthy of such love; I am a bad, wicked woman. God help me! How can you still love me, knowing what you do? How can you bear to hold me in your arms, when you remember what I have been?'

'I do not remember what you have been,' he says. 'One only remembers what one has known—and I never knew the girl who sinned. The girl I learned to love, the girl I now hold in my arms, is quite a different being. The sin has long been washed out by years of remorseful sorrow. I only know you as you are, as you have always been to me. I only know that to me you have always been good and true.'

'Ah! Frank, I *have* repented,' she whispers, sadly. 'For years I have suffered the tortures of remorse, for years I have never known a moment's peace. My one and only thought in life has been—how can I best atone? How can I expiate my sin? I have placed flowers on his grave, and on hers—his gentle wife's, lying there beside him in that'

'Hush, Diana love!' he murmurs, hastily. 'We will drop this very painful

subject—we will blot it out for ever. We now start afresh—our hearts are bare to one another—no secrets are hidden away in their depths—all is as clear as day, and all that has been impure in both of us has been washed away under the cleansing influence of our love. Let us mutually swear a perfect confidence in one another, both now and henceforth. Diana, my darling, as I love you I swear that my past life contains nothing that I would not tell—it is open before you, and you may read it as a book. Say that to me, Diana dear—and we will brave the world together till we die.'

There is a silence; and then she tries to speak, but her tongue refuses to articulate, and it ends in a hollow gasp. How can she frame the gigantic lie which is trembling on her lips? How can she, in the face of that great sacrifice which he has just made for her, deceive further his trusting heart?

'Diana, do not be afraid!' he says, tenderly. 'If you have any secrets, tell them to me—if you have not, simply state the fact. I will not humble you so far as

to enforce the oath—your word will be sufficient.'

Again he waits her answer, and again nothing comes. All the goodness of her nature is struggling to assert itself, all that is womanly and tender in her composition is fighting fiercely to disclose the hideous truth. But still she hesitates—and she is lost! How can she bear to yield him up now that she has him really in her grasp, now that she has had such a touching, all-convincing proof of the immensity of the love he bears her? No—she cannot do it, her strength is not equal to such a stupendous sacrifice—she will not do it—she would rather die! She will write to Grafton at once, and beg him to release her from her promise. There is yet time—he will not arrive for another fortnight. She will swear him to inviolable secrecy concerning her engagement, and Frank—her love her dream, her life—will never know.

'Diana, my darling, why don't you speak?'

'Frank—Frank—I swear, by God, that I have nothing in my past life which you

may not know. It, too, is an open book which you may read.'

A convulsive trembling seizes her violently from top to toe, and she leans heavily upon his neck. In this moment of awful perjury her senses seem to desert her, the room swims round her head, and she knows herself to be on the point of fainting. In complete unconsciousness of her condition, he clasps her in his arms, and imprints a kiss of passionate fervour on her lips.

'So be it, my darling!' he murmurs, huskily. 'From to-day a new life begins for us. May God look down upon us, and bless our betrothal!'

At this moment the door suddenly opens and Colonel Forsdyke appears upon the threshold of the room. Grandby hastily rises to his feet, and, with a supreme effort, Diana controls her weakness, and takes her place beside him.

It is a tall, elderly man who has entered, with a careworn cast of countenance furrowed deeply with the marks of time, with iron-grey hair and moustache, and pale blue benevolent-looking eyes which take in the situation at a glance. There

is that about his face—a look of indescribable sorrow—which has a strange effect upon Grandby's heart, causing him to move forward impulsively towards him, with the intention of shaking him by the hand. To his keen eyes, it is evident at a glance that this tall, commanding figure, looking every inch the officer and gentleman, has borne more care and suffering than is the lot of most men in this world.

But Colonel Forsdyke does not appear to see his proffered hand. He walks towards his daughter and stands before her with a look of fierce displeasure on his face.

'Diana,' he says, harshly, 'is this the way you disobey my orders? Did I not enforce on you to hold no communication with this gentleman until I had spoken with him in private? Mr. Grandby,' he says, turning to Frank, with a courtly bow, 'will you oblige me by giving me a few moments' conversation in the garden? I hear from my daughter that you have done me the honour to ask her to be your wife. Before I can listen to your proposals, I have a very painful duty to perform, which can only be done in private. I have a communication to make to you of such a

serious character that it may possibly alter your present views with regard to her.'

'I shall be very happy to come with you, sir, and hear what you have to say,' says Grandby, quietly. 'But it is only right for me to inform you that I already know what you desire to tell me. Yes, Colonel Forsdyke, I know it all. The hidden chapter in Diana's life has been revealed to me. But, sir, with your consent, I still intend to make your daughter my wife. The knowledge that has come to me has made no difference in my love. She has sinned, but she has repented, and it is not for me to condemn her for her sin.'

As he speaks he passes his arm around her waist, and stands confronting the colonel, his face illumined by the faintest tinge of colour.

The colonel looks from one to the other in amazement. He sees Grandby presenting towards him a fearless countenance, strong in its innate nobility, and he sees his daughter clinging to his arm, her head upon his shoulder. As to what he has heard issue from Grandby's mouth, he can-

not believe his senses. It is too impossible —too incredible—too amazing to comprehend. And then, swift as thought, a dark suspicion overcomes him, and a look of intense severity settles on his brow.

'Mr. Grandby—you cannot know—it is impossible,' he says. 'Now, as all along, you have been deceived—fearfully deceived —you have no'

'I do know all,' says Grandby, firmly, 'and you will comprehend that I have not been deceived when I tell you my informant's name. It was Mr. Loftus!'

'Loftus!' he raises his hand to his forehead with a sudden movement. 'Ah! then you indeed know all! Mr. Grandby,' he adds, quickly, 'will you oblige me by coming outside. I do not understand—I should like to speak to you in private on this matter.'

'Certainly, sir!'

He turns towards Diana, and, in spite of her father's presence, folds her in his arms and kisses her on the forehead.

'Good-bye, my darling—till to-morrow,' he says, lovingly. 'I will come and see you early in the morning.'

She clings to him with a passionate earnestness, and draws his head down towards her.

'Frank—Frank!' she whispers, hoarsely. 'What will he say to you? Will you be influenced by him against me?'

'Trust in me, my darling,' he whispers in return, and with a last kiss he turns away and leaves the room preceded by the colonel, who has been watching the scene in thorough mystification.

The two men descend the stairs, and emerge into the open, and it is not until they have arrived at the further extremity of the tennis-court that they halt and face each other, and the silence is broken. It is the colonel who speaks. He rests his hand upon the young man's arm, and looks him steadily in the face.

'Tell me, Mr. Grandby,' he says, 'exactly what you mean.'

In a moment Grandby has commenced to explain himself. Describing concisely and accurately the whole pith of the accusation which Loftus has brought against Diana, he shows the colonel firstly that he is indeed cognisant of the whole affair. And then he goes on to narrate to

him, humbly and diffidently, as though afraid of being thought presumptuous in attempting to dictate to his elder on the question of right and wrong, in detail the mental analysis which he has undergone, and which has resulted in his forgiveness of Diana, and in his decision not to depart from his original intention of making her his wife. The colonel listens to him in amazement, and, as he ceases to speak, he extends his arm and shakes him warmly by the hand.

'Mr. Grandby,' he says, in a faltering voice, and there is a suspicion of moisture in his eyes. 'No words of mine can express to you my intense admiration for your truly noble character—can thank you sufficiently for the goodness and wondrous charity you have extended to my erring child. It is past all thanks, past all expression of the human tongue—I can only stand before you, and humbly acknowledge that I have received a lesson to-day which covers my grey-hairs with shame. In you, I have met a character which so far surpasses my own that they cannot even be compared. But ah! Mr. Grandby, believe me—my daughter is not worthy of such a

noble treatment—and it is I, her own father, who condemns her.'

'Sir, she has repented. As I know her—as I have learned to love her—there is no wickedness in her nature—it has been cleansed, purged, and it is again as white as snow.'

'May you be right!' he says, passing his hand wearily across his brow. 'God forgive me if my doubts have no foundation. Since that awful day, when she broke my heart and name, I have never been able to regard her as my offspring. I have fed and clothed her, I have given her a shelter for her head, but I have given her nothing more. Love and tenderness died out of my heart on that fatal night, when I found that she had fled wilfully to dishonour.'

'But it will return—it must return some day,' cries Grandby, eagerly. 'The instinct of paternity will be too strong to be repressed for ever. Ah! sir—has her long suffering repentance no weight in your eyes? Can you, her father, condemn her utterly for one false step, taken in thoughtless youth?'

'I may be wrong,' he says, wearily.

'Perhaps I am unjust to her—but how can I believe in her again, after what she did? How can I see into her inmost thoughts—how can I make certain of her repentance? She has sinned once—sinned terribly—outraged honour, virtue, modesty, respect—sacrificed all that women should hold most dear. How can I tell that she will not again deceive me? It may have been a great temptation or it may have been innate wickedness, which prompted her to sin. Which it was, I do not know—I have never asked—I have never referred once to the subject, since she was again allowed to enter my doors. But, if it were the latter, God help us all, for it were as easy to cure a cancerous wound as to purify a heart radically impure.'

'I have no doubt in *my* heart,' says Grandby, firmly, deeply moved by the rugged pathos of the old man's words. 'Can you not trust to the subtle intuition of my love? It tells me plainly that her repentance is sincere.'

'And so once I thought—so once I believed her. I loved her fondly, foolishly, devotedly—she was the apple of my eye—she was everything to me in life. I

denied her nothing—her every whim, her slightest fancy was obeyed, as though it had been some imperial command. Day and night I thought of her, planning how to please her, I worshipped her—she even usurped the citadel of my God. My trust in her was boundless, my faith illimitable —I knew, through the *intuition of my love*, that she was a creature fitted to take her place in the celestial throng above. And of what worth was the intuition of my love? One day, without a word, she left me—forsook me—basely deserted the father whose only fault was that he had been too kind to her—left her home, her life of innocence and calm enjoyment—left it for the vile embraces of her seducer. Ah! God, I can never believe in her again!'

He turns away with a gesture of despair.

'Then, believe me, Colonel Forsdyke, you are doing her a grievous wrong,' says Grandby, earnestly, turning deadly pale. 'I, too, have had opportunity of studying her character, and the result of my study is that she is worthy of every trust, that she has thoroughly repented of her

sin. There is no reason why any man should not be proud to call her his wife. I love her, and she loves me—our faith in one another is perfect, boundless—and you cannot refuse your consent to our union. Allow me to be my own judge upon this matter. Give me your daughter—*I* have no fear for the future. Give her as my wife, and together we will prove to you how unjustly you have judged her.'

'God grant that such may be the case!' murmurs the old man, gazing wistfully up to heaven. 'If, Mr. Grandby, you continue to *still* persist in your determination—after all that I have said——'

'I do!' says Grandby, firmly and defiantly.

'Then I will not withhold from you my consent. Take her—she is yours. But do not lay the blame on me if, in the future, she turns out contrary to your expectations. Remember that I—her own father—solemnly warned you of the risk that you were running.'

'There is no risk,' says Grandby, with earnest confidence, holding out his hand. 'I thank you, Colonel Forsdyke, for your goodness. It will be my one aim in life to

prove to you that you were wrong in your estimate of your daughter's character.'

'God grant that you may be successful!'

CHAPTER XIV.

A STRANGER AT BANBURY'S.

A GLORIOUS morning breaks upon the Doonga Hill, scattering the fogs and mists, and disclosing peak after peak, range after range in one long sweep of clear sunlight. It is as though the autumn, jealous of the encroachments made by winter upon its rightful territory, had determined to assert itself, and with one last stupendous effort to show itself to be still possessed of life.

The sun shines down warmly and merrily upon the pleasure-grounds surrounding the hotel, licking up—such is its insatiable thirst—every drop of moisture to be found upon the close-cut lawns and tennis-courts; and the flowers, still faintly glis-

tening with their little crystal beads of dew, turn towards it, and lie, with petals extended, basking in the heat. The trees, alive with the joyous song of birds, under the pleasant influence of the sun, seem to have taken a second spell of life, for there is a look of greenness and freshness about them which has not been observed during the last few days, and, as though conscious of the fact, they seem to raise their crests of foliage more proudly heavenwards than has lately been their wont. A faint breeze is blowing from the south—blowing warm and redolent of the scents of deodar and pine.

It is a gala day, and Nature has arrayed herself in bright and shining colours to do honour to the glad occasion. It is a day on which all living creatures, including man, experience a pleasurable consciousness of their existence—a day breathing joy, and peace, and sweet content to all creation. And yet to many it will always be remembered as a day of sorrow and despair, of bitterness and ruined hope, of anguish and great weeping—a day, the very blackest in the calendar of life. On this fair day, as on every other day

in every other year, many human souls will be lost in the darkness of an eternal night, irrespective of the disappearance of that grand and lovely sun behind the mountain slopes.

Mrs. Stockton—a blot upon the fairness of the scene—oblivious to the beauties of the day, is prowling round about the garden paths cogitating deeply over certain matters connected with her own immediate person. By that morning's post, she has received a letter from her husband, which has roused all the malignancy of her temperament to fever height. Intense mortification, baffled rage, and impotent spite take possession of her, and, fighting for supremacy, banish all better feelings from the region of her brain. She feels herself helpless, powerless, directly checkmated—incapable of retort or retaliation, for the letter has given her no legitimate clue to her husband's present whereabouts. Prior to her receiving it, it has been artfully despatched down south, and thence it has been re-directed, bearing the post-mark 'Bangalore.'

The colonel, taking advantage of the mystery surrounding his present location,

has summoned up courage to write to her in a dictatorial manner which has galled her to the quick. Accustomed as she has been for the last quarter-of-a-century to tread rough-shod upon the rugged path of connubial duty, this sudden turning of the worm, in the person of her wretched husband, has filled her with stupefied amazement, and convulsed her with a vitriolic indignation. Such a gross outrage to her dignity she has never received before, and the knowledge of her utter powerlessness to avenge the insult goads her malignant spirit to little short of madness.

In as few words as possible, and in a phraseology inclined to the sarcastic, her husband has intimated to her that after long and careful consideration of the question he has been compelled to arrive at the conclusion that it would be better for them in the future if they were to agree to live apart. He has for some time noticed, he says—for a matter of twenty years, in fact—that her temper has been distinctly sharp and unpleasant, and he feels morally convinced that this acidity of disposition is due to the fact of her having stayed too

long in the baneful climate of Hindostan. And this conviction on his part is based on a scientific as well as on a moral ground—the veriest tyro in the acquirement of a knowledge of the science of chemistry will inform her that concentrated acids, exposed to extreme heat, are liable to ignite spontaneously.

He has therefore resolved that she should at once return to England, and, with this idea, he has ordered Messrs. King and Co., Bombay, to book for her a passage in the Peninsular and Oriental steamship *Travencore*, starting from that port on the fifteenth of the following month. She will, therefore, have ample time to arrange her effects, settle her affairs, and pack up—with the understanding that anything left behind will be sold at once by auction to the highest bidder. By the same post that she receives this letter, she will receive a copy of the Indian *Bradshaw*, in which she will find every information necessary to her safe conduct to Bombay. He would suggest page twenty-five to her earnest consideration. Halting at Delhi the night, by the Bombay

and Baroda line, she could accomplish the journey in ninety-six hours. He would advise her to provide herself with a thick veil, as the latter portion of that line is notorious for its dust—it is due he believes, though he cannot say for certain, to the embankment being composed of loose sand.

There is no need for him to mention the severity of the mental struggle that he has undergone before he has been able to bring himself to consent to this important step; but the gravity of the case will not admit of him paying heed to selfish considerations. If he wishes to fulfil his duty as a husband, the preservation of her health must be considered first above all other earthly things, and he would be laying himself open to the most virulent criticism were he to allow himself to be influenced one iota by any maudlin sentiment.

Naturally, when she has gone, there will be no need for him to retain the same establishment as before, so he has given orders for all his effects—horses, carriages, crockery, plate, furniture—to be sold at once. He has also dismissed his servants, and has given up his house to the briga-

dier, who, she may remember, has long been desirous of possessing it. It is his intention, for the future, to live a simple, frugal, bachelor life; and, with this purpose, he has arranged to share a small house with Major Blank of his regiment—who, in addition, has kindly agreed to superintend the auction-sale. Though force of circumstances will preclude the possibility of their meeting, he is sure that there is no need for him to state that his sympathies will follow her across the seas. He hopes that she will have a smooth passage; he hopes that she will write occasionally; he hopes that the English climate will have a speedy and beneficial effect upon her temper. He places no restrictions upon her choice of habitation, nor upon her style of living. She may go where she pleases, she may do what she pleases, she may say what she pleases—in fact, he limits her in nothing except in her allowance. The sum of one hundred pounds will be paid in to Messrs. Cox and Co., quarterly. It will necessitate her investing in a cheque-book. She should never forget the precaution of crossing her cheques with two broad lines, and writ-

ing the words 'Not negotiable' across the top.

This is the substance of the letter she has received. The Indian *Bradshaw* was hurled at her ayah's head, and disappeared through the open window into the yard below, where it was worried to shreds by two fox-terrier puppies, the property of Major Lamb ; and, had this gallant officer's wife been made cognisant of the circumstance, she would probably, out of the fulness of her heart, have promoted these two dirty little specimens of canine humanity into lapdogs of the most privileged and exclusive order. But, unfortunately for them, their heroic action was not reported, and so, like many human beings similarly circumstanced, they remained unrewarded.

Mrs. Stockton, feeling inclined to shriek aloud, such is the intensity of her mortification, continues to prowl up and down, planning vain schemes of retaliation against her husband, glaring savagely from right to left as though to discover something—anything—on which to vent her rage. As she passes the hotel for the thirtieth time in the last hour, the door

opens, and she finds herself face to face with Grandby and Miss Forsdyke.

Their faces, overflowing with joy and happiness, plainly tell their tale. That their hearts are bound together in the closest bonds of a perfect love and sympathy is evident at a glance.

Ah! what a wondrously handsome pair they make! Even she, in her blind, insensate hate, cannot deny the fact. His olive skin is glowing with the flush of youth and health, and there is an air of unaccustomed hauteur in the carriage of his head due to his pride in the possession of the girl he loves, which enhances the beauty of his presence. She, Diana, is clinging to his arm, her whole face illumined and transfigured by the consciousness of her love. Standing beside each other, it seems as though nature had created them expressly for one another.

'Good-morning, Mrs. Stockton,' says Grandby, pleasantly. 'Is not this a glorious day?'

His sense of happiness is so great that it precludes him from entertaining ill-feeling against any human soul. He

wishes to be at peace with all men and women, and he takes this opportunity of making up his difference with Mrs. Stockton.

Mrs. Stockton is not so well-inclined—she is, on the contrary, feeling directly antagonistic to the whole of God's creation. With an expression of intense dislike upon her face, she eyes them both from top to toe, and then, ignoring the proffered hand, she gives vent to a loud grunt of disapprobation.

Grandby laughs good-humouredly. If all the forces of nature were to combine upon this particular morning to make him lose his temper, they would fail!

'Oh! Mrs. Stockton,' he says, 'you really must shake hands. Why should you bear me any enmity? Let us act up to that popular old adage concerning bygones of a disagreeable flavour. Besides, I want to thank you for what you have done for me. I am indebted to you more than I can say, for had it not been for you, in all likelihood, I should not have been engaged at this moment to this young lady here;' and he draws Diana's arm affectionately through his own.

'Ugh!' she snorts, contemptuously. 'You are a pretty couple, aren't you?'

'It is most gratifying to hear you pass such favourable comment on our appearances,' he says, smiling mischievously. 'And so you think that we suit each other in looks, do you? Well, between ourselves, Mrs. Stockton, I am of your opinion—I think we do. Judging ourselves as impartially as I can under the circumstances, I am of an opinion that we are by no means a bad-looking couple. What say you? Nothing! Oh! really this is too bad of you! But I am afraid that we cannot stay longer now, for we are just going to pay a last visit to that little secluded spot down in the wood where you so pleasantly surprised us on Monday last. Good-morning—I am sorry that you won't shake hands.'

'Good-morning,' she says, stiffly, tilting her nose disdainfully into the air. 'As to shaking hands—kindly remember that you are speaking to a Christian woman who has been brought up to consider indecent goings-on in the depth of a wood as disgusting and immoral. Yes—you are a handsome couple, I admit it—but it is the

beauty of a languorous lust—a thing to be repudiated, not admired—but it will fade, the beauty will die out, and then only the lust will remain plainly written on your countenances, to be read by every passer-by. Ugh! I do not envy you—if anything, I *pity* you. Good-morning, Miss Forsdyke—I trust that your solemn covenant with Mr. George Grafton of the Engineers is progressing well;' with which parting shaft she picks up her skirts to avoid the contamination of contact, and sweeps away.

The two young people regard with unconcealed amusement her unwieldy figure moving off, and then they look into each other's face, and simultaneously break into a hearty peal of laughter. Ah! how divinely happy they are in the consciousness of their mutual love!

'Come on, my darling,' he murmurs, 'I want to spend a long, long morning in that dear old spot.'

Mrs. Stockton pursues her savage prowl. She hears that merry peal of laughter with a shudder—it seems to stab her like a knife. The knowledge that Grandby has only spoken the truth in stating that they owed the present position of affairs simply to

herself, is gall and wormwood to her spiteful spirit. Instead of injuring them materially for life, as she had hoped to do, she has blindly played into their hands, and has given them an overwhelming victory.

In spite of her vaunted high morality and strict adherence to the doctrines of the Christian faith, she feels incensed beyond endurance at the thought of having unconsciously been instrumental in bringing happiness to two of her fellow-creatures. But Mrs. Stockton does not profess to be an 'early Christian.' Like most modern Christians of the nineteenth century, she would have scorned such a low imputation. Her religion, though founded on the same basis as was that of that little band of men who in the first century suffered persecution at the hands of their Roman masters for the sake of their creed, is of a superior and far more comfortable description. Instead of blindly believing, without reservation of any description, the Book of God, the doctrines of her faith are divided into two distinct sections—those to be regarded literally and those figuratively, just according as they happen to be agreeable or dis-

agreeable to her own particular taste. In fact, all obstacles in the way of her obtaining ultimate salvation are blandly swept aside; instead of a religion of beliefs, it becomes one of inclinations; she has only to do exactly what she pleases through life in order to ensure a pair of wings and a court dress in the levée held above.

What could be more simple, more alluring, more comforting than this? Only to loll and lounge through life, committing every infamy that she pleases, and then to be certain of a right of entry into heaven! Thoroughly believing in the efficacy of her own religion, she is at a loss to understand how people can exist who prefer to follow the doctrines of the early Christian faith. Certainly these people are very few and far between, but still they *do* exist, for occasionally she comes across one, and what she sees fills her with wonder and astonishment. If two roads lead up to the summit of a mountain, it would be only natural to choose the easier of the two. How then does it happen that there are people in the world who, given the choice of two paths to heaven, deliberately elect

the harder one. The one is smooth as asphalte with no perceptible incline; the other is rough, jagged, and precipitous. To wilfully choose the latter one, is in Mrs. Stockton's opinion to wilfully throw away one's chance of after-life.

The fault of the early Christian doctrine in her eyes lies in its dogmatic manner of assertion. It arrogantly states that such and such a thing is true, and, without offering any proofs in support of its assertion, it threatens all who do not believe in it with lasting condemnation. There is a flavour of brutal bullying about the style, which sickens her, and, in the face of the threat, she utterly rejects it.

Now in her own adaptation of the Christian faith, there is none of that dictatorial enunciation of authority. Dogma is entirely swept away—bullying of every description is forbidden—the weak are placed on an equality with the strong. No one man, divine or otherwise, is allowed to state, that such and such a thing is wrong, or such is right; every human being is allowed to judge for himself. If his inclinations prompt him to do an action, then

it is right—if they prompt him to leave it alone, then it is wrong. Such is her definition of that great question which has baffled philosophers from Christ to Herbert Spencer!

And so it will be seen that her religion admits of an elasticity of opinion suitable to all tastes and all moods. What is right one day is wrong another, and *vice versâ* just according to her pleasure. For instance, the year preceding when she was scheming night and day to get an invitation to the Viceroy's private dance at Simla, she considered that the maxim of 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' was to be regarded literally. Now, on this particular morning, watching Grandby and his fiancée leave the garden from the corner of her eye with a malignant scowl, she considers that it should be regarded figuratively. Could any human being devise a happier code of morality than this?

She takes her husband's letter from her pocket, and peruses it with a savage cast of countenance. What is she to do? Her horses, carriages, furniture—everything has been sold; her servants have been dis-

missed; her house has been destroyed. She is helpless, powerless to retaliate, utterly at the mercy of that man who swore at God's altar to love her, comfort her, and honour her, in sickness and health, to cleave unto her forsaking all others, as long as they both should live. Ah! what an awful perjury he has uttered! May he be judged accordingly!

She thanks her God that *she* has never broken the marriage vow. She has obeyed him, served him, loved him, honoured him; she has kept him in sickness and health—'kept him in order' is her mental reservation; she has forsaken all others, and clung to him—sometimes with the ferocity of a panther, but she wisely ignores the circumstance. And this is the result! This is the gratitude of her husband for her goodness! Oh! if she only had his miserable carcase at this moment under lock and key, she would soon show him

What she would have demonstrated to her unfortunate husband, had she but obtained the chance, will never be known, for at this moment her train of thought comes to an abrupt end by her becoming aware of the figure of a man standing at the

further end of the path opposite the house. Giving him a scrutinising glance out of her small grey eyes, she discovers him to be a total stranger.

He is a tall, well-built young man, with broad shoulders and a well-set head, with short, light brown hair, and a luxuriant moustache of the same colour, with a wide expanse of forehead, protecting two soft blue eyes, a straight, well-made nose, and well-turned chin—a man striking in his manliness, with an intellectual face of unusual strength and resolution. He is standing in the middle of the path, gazing vaguely about him, as though in doubt. He raises his eyes to the upper row of windows, and scans the rambling building closely, and then he turns round and slowly walks towards the entrance of the house.

Mrs. Stockton's curiosity is aroused. Alkalizing to the best of her ability the acidity of her temperament, she walks towards him, purposely kicking the gravel with her feet to attract his attention. At the sound he turns round, and, after a moment's hesitation, hastily advances towards her. As he approaches her, she notices that his face is deadly pale.

'I beg your pardon,' he says, politely, raising his hat. 'Would you be so kind as to inform me whether this be Banbury's Hotel?'

'Yes, this is Banbury's,' she replies, with unctuous urbanity. 'Are you thinking of stopping here? I am sadly afraid that the house is quite full.'

'No—I was not thinking of stopping here,' he says, in a vague, dreamy way, as if his thoughts were far away. 'I have just come up from the plains, in order to see a friend of mine. I wonder whether you would be able to direct me where to find him. His name is Grandby.'

'Ah! Grandby, is it?' she says, her whole being turning suddenly to fiery acid. 'Yes, I think I can assist you. But I trust that I am not speaking to a personal friend of Mr. Grandby's.'

'Well, well—but may I ask . . .'

'Because, sir,' she answers, shortly, 'I have no wish to hold any communication whatever with a friend of that young man's. You can't touch pitch without being defiled, and, if ever a human being resembled pitch, it is that wicked, immoral youth. No ladies who have any regard

for decency and morality ever speak to him. There is certainly one young lady who goes about with him, but then she cannot be included in that category. You will find her now with him, together in the wood. Oh! the wickedness of this world—my heart grows faint to think of it.'

'I am sorry to hear such a bad report of Grandby,' he says, steadying his voice with an effort. 'I must admit to being somewhat interested in his personality. Would you excuse me if I were to ask you whether you could inform me if there be any truth in this strange rumour of his engagement?'

'Engagement!' she cries, discordantly. 'Yes, he *is* engaged, and time enough too, I should think, for both parties. His goings-on with that young girl have been a standing scandal to the neighbourhood. The whole station is up in arms against him—the open way in which he has paraded his indecent conduct has been sickening and revolting. The whole of the Himalayan range has been polluted by his presence here. What with secret meetings, kissings, slobberings, unholy embraces,

and what besides, I dare not think, though, being a Christian woman, I would like to give him the benefit of the doubt, if reason did not forbid me making such an egregious idiot . . .'

'May I ask the young lady's name?' he says, very quietly.

'Yes—her name is Miss Forsdyke, the most brazen-faced hussy in the whole peninsular. Oh! they will make a pretty pair. If they don't figure in the Divorce Court before a couple of years, my name is not Joanna Stockton. If you want to see them with your own eyes, in the midst of their disgusting practices, take that road there through the gate, and lead up the avenue till you come out into the open. There you will see a large projecting rock. Take the little path behind it, and continue straight down through the wood. You cannot miss them, you will find them under a great oak—— *Well, I never!* where are you going to? Is that the way you are accustomed to treat an obliging lady? Where are your manners, you low—impertinent—snobbish—counter-jumper?'

Mrs. Stockton's thick voice rises to a scream, for the stranger has suddenly left

her, without a word of thanks, and is striding along in the direction which she has given him, as fast as his long legs can carry him. His face, destitute of every trace of colouring, is working convulsively, as though under the influence of some great mental suffering; and such in fact is the case, for the stranger, who has so suddenly appeared is George Grafton, and he is now hastening forward to hear confirmed with his own ears the death-knell to all his dreams of future happiness.

CHAPTER XV.

NEMESIS.

'See, Diana—here is the dear old spot we know so well. Ah! how I love every leaf and branch and fern, for they have all been silent witnesses to the gradual growth of our present happiness.'

They are standing together on that grassy knoll, rising like an islet amidst the sea of surrounding fern, now sombre with the russet tints of autumn; his arm is passed affectionately around her waist. The sun's rays are piercing through the yellowing foliage of the grand old oak, brightening up the soft green turf with patches of golden light, and the whole wood is alive with the soothing hum of

flying insects, tempted out from their secluded homes by the unexpected heat.

She leans her head caressingly against his shoulder, and takes his other hand in hers, with a gentle pressure of the fingers. Oh! what a thrill of beatific bliss that consciousness of contact sends through both their frames!

'My love—my love!' she murmurs softly, in a voice of subdued ecstacy. 'I am not deserving of this happiness. Frank, what can I do to prove to you that I am grateful for your great goodness?'

'My little darling,' he whispers, bending down towards her. 'You exaggerate my goodness. If loving you is being good to you, then I am indeed good. But I can take no credit to myself for being thus good, for it is through no effort of mine, that I have come to love you, but through some unknown, hidden force, totally distinct from my own entity, which I have found it impossible to resist.'

'Ah! but you are good—you are more than good to me—you have shown yourself divine. Frank, my love,' she whispers, nestling closer against his side. 'You

have done that which not one man out of a thousand would have done—you have forgiven me a terrible and awful sin.'

'Hush, Diana!' he says, tightening the pressure of his hand. 'We must never refer to that again. The sin you committed has been washed out long ago in years of repentance and remorse. It no longer exists—it has been effaced, it is as though it never was. To me it never *did* exist. The little girl I hold now in my arms is innocent and pure—in my eyes she has never committed sin. She is a different creature, with a different mind and spirit, from that poor girl who three years ago had no strength to withstand a terrible temptation. No, Diana, we must never again speak of that poor, erring being—we must never sully the purity of our love by referring to that mournful circumstance.'

'Ah! Frank—how can I thank you?'

With a passionate movement, she throws her arms round his neck, and buries her face against his breast.

'I will be good to you—always good to you,' she cries, in a choking voice. 'I

will always love you, as I love you now. I will lay down my life for you as a small repayment of that goodness and charity you have bestowed upon me.'

'Hush, my little pet!' he whispers, taking her face between his hands, and kissing her on the lips. 'I am already repaid a thousandfold by the possession of your love. Only love me always—I want nothing more. Only be true to me always, confiding to me your joys and sorrows, and I shall be content. Diana, my little wife-to-be, we must never in the future have secrets from one another. Nothing, however trifling, must be hidden—even as now, our hearts and minds must always be to one another as the pages of an open book.'

'Yes—yes, Frank, they must—they shall,' she answers faintly, shivering slightly. 'We will never conceal anything from one another—even as now—ah! what was that?—I thought . . .'

She turns quickly round, and then a cry, sharp and shrill, issues from her lips, re-echoing through the stillnesses of the wood, and, with face blanched and eyes

dilated with horror, she staggers back against the tree. Within ten paces of her is George Grafton, the man whom she has so shamefully betrayed!

He is standing regarding them, nervously gnawing his moustaches, with a face almost of the same dead-white colour as her own.

Filled with astonishment, Grandby advances towards him.

'George—old boy,' he cries, in tones of utter bewilderment. 'Do we meet at last, after all these years of weary waiting? But how, in the name of . . .'

'Keep back!'

The words come out sharply and authoritatively in a tone which his dearest friend on earth fails to recognize, and a wave of the fiercest anger sweeps across his face.

'Keep back!' he cries. 'Do you hear me? Advance another step, and I will strike you to the ground.'

Grandby stops dead, as though suddenly turned to stone. Amazed beyond the power of thinking, he gazes in the utmost bewilderment from one to the other, unable to form the least conception of the

reality of the situation. A sense of overwhelming confusion overcomes him—an oppressive feeling of hideous unreality—a vague, strange doubt as to the integrity of his reason. What does it all mean? Why does his beloved friend spurn him as a creature of contamination?

'George!' he falters.

'Not a word!'

He starts back as though shot; that unknown peremptoriness of tone pierces him like a blade of steel. He turns towards Diana in the hopes of obtaining from her some clue to this appalling mystery. He sees her crouching down at the foot of the hollowed trunk, her face covered in her hands, her whole body spasmodically convulsed with trembling. A sense of vague fear benumbs the region of his heart, and it is with the greatest difficulty that he can retrace his steps towards her.

'Diana,' he whispers, hoarsely, bending over her, 'tell me what it means.'

She does not answer him. Without disclosing her face, she motions him away, and a moan of pain escapes her lips.

'Diana,' he persists, and his voice is now so husky that he can barely articulate, 'what does it mean? Do not be frightened, my little darling—there is no cause for fear . . .'

'I will tell you what it means,' cries that strange, unknown voice, and, at the sound, Grandby starts up and faces him. 'It means this—it means that you, Frank Grandby—you, whom I have considered as my alter ego; you, whom I have loved and cared for with a tenderness too great for words—have deliberately ruined my happiness for ever by basely robbing me of my promised wife.'

'What!'

With a face blanched to the lips he falls back against the tree. Is he dreaming? Has he heard aright? Is he under the spell of a vivid nightmare, hideous beyond the powers of description?—or is it truth—reality—actually existent? He does not know—for the moment he has lost all consciouness in his personal identity. All is confusion and chaos in his brain, and the power of rational thought deserts him.

'Yes—by basely robbing me of my

promised wife,' cries Grafton, passionately. 'This is how you have chosen to repay me for all my love and kindness in the past. I did not believe you—I thought you wrote to me in jest—and yet—and yet there was a ring of earnestness in your words that troubled me—and I hurried up to have the jest explained. In the garden I heard the story of your shame, and even then I could not believe in such monstrous treachery. I followed her, and with my own eyes I have seen you kissing *her* who had sworn to be my wife. Take her—she is yours—she will be a woman worthy to mate with such as you. Make her your wife, and be happy—if you can. Forget your vile betrayal of the man who loved you as a brother—*if you can!*'

'George—George!' he cries, hoarsely, starting forward, galvanized to life by the fierce anguish of those bitter tones. 'It is not true—it is not true—you are labouring under some great error. Be calm, I implore you, and let us understand each other. This is Miss Forsdyke. I wrote to you, explaining all the details of my engagement. What have I to do with Miss Rigby—your promised wife?'

'Miss Rigby!' with a bitter, discordant laugh of scorn. 'What is Miss Rigby to me? No, Frank Grandby, you cannot deceive me by such frail and futile subterfuges. The girl I loved, in whom I placed a perfect trust, in whom I centred all my chance of future happiness was Diana Forsdyke, not Miss Rigby—*and you knew* it!'

'*Knew* it! George—By God above, I swear I never knew it! Knew it—knew it! How could I know it when it is not true? Diana, my little darling,' he cries, bending over her and speaking in hoarse, guttural tones. 'Tell me that it is not true. It is not true, is it, love? Only yesterday you swore to me by God that you contained no secrets in your life. Diana darling, you did not deceive me, did you? There is some grave mistake—speak out my love and'

'It is true, I tell you!' cries the deep, passionate tones of Grafton. 'Let her deny it, if she can. She cannot deny it—she has plighted her troth to me and she has deliberately and vilely broken it. The two I have loved best in the world have

combined together to betray me—henceforth I am alone and friendless in this world. Never from this moment do I hope to set eyes on you again—you have passed, both of you, from my life for ever.'

He wheels sharply round and begins to stride away. In a moment Grandby is by his side.

'You *must* hear me,' he cries, seizing him by the arm, 'I am innocent—I swear it by all that is sacred in the universe. George, my dearest friend, I would not willingly harm'

'Enough! I will not listen to your pitiful excuses,' cries Grafton, shaking him off with a violent movement of the arm. 'I judge from what I see. I accuse you of robbing me of my betrothed—and I dare you to deny it!'

'George, you must hear me!'

'*I will not!*' cries Grafton, with a sudden fury, raising his clenched fist. 'Do you wish me to strike you down? If you say another word I will—it is only the memory of the love I bore you that has prevented me from doing so already.'

Uttering a low cry of pain, with a face

as pale as death, Grandby releases his hold and staggers back, and, without looking round or uttering another word, Grafton strides away and disappears from sight up the narrow pathway leading to the road above.

Stunned, bewildered, unable to move or speak, Grandby stands with his hand pressed tightly against his forehead gazing after the retreating form of his beloved friend. A mist arises before his eyes; his faculty of thought becomes obscured; a darkness settles on the earth, and the whole wood seems to begin to revolve slowly round him. With a supreme effort he steps back a couple of paces and clings firmly for support to the outstretched branch of the old oak. A great giddiness assails him—the trees revolve faster and faster around him—he knows that he is on the point of fainting. And then a confusion of noises in his ears followed by a great blank and a gradual awakening to life coupled with a vague sense of wonderment as to what has happened.

He is roused from his stupefied reverie by the consciousness of a pair of soft arms

clinging round his legs. With a feeling of intense weariness he raises his head, and looking down he perceives Miss Forsdyke's dead-pale face crouching at his feet. In a moment his senses have returned to him; he remembers all. With a loud cry he tears himself from her embrace, stepping backwards with a gesture of abhorrence. She falls forward with her head upon the ground, stretching out her hands towards him with a movement of piteous appeal.

'Back!' he cries, and the discordant tones of his own voice frighten him, so strangely do they sound. 'Back! Do not dare to touch me—or—or—I shall forget myself!'

'Frank!'

Lifting her face from the ground, the word bursts forth from her lips in a fierce heart-rending cry. 'Frank! Do not spurn me, love!'

'Love!' he cries, with a burst of derisive laughter. 'Do not speak to me of love! There can be no love between *us* in the future. From the very first there can never have existed any love in you for me, or—or

—my God, my heart is breaking—you could never have deceived me in this monstrous way. Two strong and trusting lives ruined—destroyed—by your vile infamy! Ah! I cannot trust myself to speak to you! Diana—good-bye for ever!'

He makes a movement, as though to go away.

'You shall not go—you shall not go!' she cries, with a fierce energy, starting to her feet, and standing in his path. 'You are mine, and mine alone by virtue of my love. Frank—Frank—the one noble, elevating influence of my life has been my love for you. It has been pure—perfect—strong—so strong that I have swept away all earthly considerations to obtain you. And I *have* obtained you! Yes—Frank—my darling, you love me—I know you do—and I defy you to forsake me, for you cannot.'

In her passion, she advances towards him with outstretched arms. Her face is illumined by a hectic flush on either cheek, her breath comes in sudden gasps, her whole frame is seized with a sudden trembling which almost overcomes her. Placing

her hand upon her heaving bosom, she tries to steady the tumultuous beatings of her heart. All that she has striven for, planned for, is slowly passing from her grasp—she feels the solid ground shifting from beneath her feet—in a moment she may be submerged in the quicksands of hopelessness and ruin. Self-control, coolness, courage, determination, she knows to be essential, as she hopes to save herself, and yet she can neither be cool, courageous, nor determined. In this moment of supreme peril, her presence of mind deserts her, and she feels that she is doomed.

'Ah! no—you shall not go!' she pants. 'I will not let you go. I am a bad woman—I know I am. I have intrigued and schemed for you. I have obtained you under false pretences. But, ah!—Frank, my life, my darling, my love for you has always been sincere. It has been the one pure influence of my life—I cannot give it up. If it goes—I am lost—I am ruined. I cannot live without it. Frank—Frank, my whole future is depending on a word from you. Overlook this fault—extend your great forgiveness further—and I am

saved. Reject me—cast me off—and—I —am—lost!'

Her voice dies out in a hoarse whisper. She advances another step towards him, and the beauty of her face shines out transcendentally in this moment of mortal agony.

For a moment he does not answer her. He stands gazing at her vaguely, mechanically, as though entranced, unable to speak or move. Timidly she raises her hand and places it on his arm, looking up into his face with a supplicating glance of mute appeal. As he becomes conscious of the sense of contact, the spell is broken.

'Never!' he cries, with fierce vehemence, starting back. 'Keep back—do not approach another step! You have deceived me—wilfully deceived me in the face of the charity which I have already vouchsafed to you. Diana Forsdyke, you are a wicked woman. Only yesterday you swore to me that you held no secrets in your life —and all the time you were deliberately planning the ruin of a noble man. Ah! God—what have I done?—Wretch!—Fiend!—Have you no spark of woman's

gentleness in your composition? Knowing how I loved this man, what devil was it that prompted you to conceive such a hideous idea as to make *me* instrumental in his ruin?—Keep back, I say!—Forgiveness!—Love!—In the future I have neither love nor forgiveness in my heart for you!'

Again he attempts to move away; again she stops him. A burst of hysterical laughter issues from her lips.

'Ah! Frank, you cannot help yourself,' she cries. 'A sudden shock cannot kill such a love as yours. I know it well—I know its strength, its power, its immutability,' she continues, with fierce rapidity; 'it is permanent—it will last—it cannot die. You cannot give me up—try—try—try your hardest—you will love me to the end.'

'You are right—I shall,' he answers, turning very pale. 'You have gauged correctly the quality of my love—it was a love worth possessing. But you have not gauged rightly my strength of will—for I now again repeat, that it is my intention to leave you, never meaning to look upon

your face again. Tell your father what you like—invent any reason that may suit you best. I shall not say a word—I shall simply go away never to return.'

'You do not mean it!'

She is standing before him, with her hands clasped in piteous supplication, her face torn and distorted with the greatness of her misery, and the words burst from her lips in a choking sob.

'I mean it,' he replies, with a sudden falter in his voice; and then, fearful lest he may break down before her, he turns away.

A shrill cry of piercing agony re-echoes through the wood. It is Diana's voice, and in another moment she is clinging round his neck, gazing hungrily up into his well-loved face.

'No—no—you do not mean it!' she pants, in short, hurried gasps; 'you cannot mean to give me up!'

Oh! how he loves her! He looks down at her lovely face, now white to the lips with an awful fear, and a wild yearning comes across him to seize her in his arms and to forgive her all.

'No—no—you do not mean it!'

'I do—Diana, leave go of me . . .'

'You shall not—you cannot—I will cling to you for ever—I will never let you go!'

'Leave me, I say!' he cries, fiercely, seizing her by the wrists, and vainly trying to separate her hands.

'Ah! Frank—you hurt me.'

'Leave go of me at once!'

'Never—never!' she cries, faintly, clenching her teeth together in her attempt to endure the pain caused by his grasp of iron. 'Frank—Frank—listen to me—if you leave me, I will kill myself—I . . .'

'Leave go—leave go, Diana, or—or God help you, your wrist will break.'

'Never!' she cries, more faintly still, her head falling helplessly forward from sheer physical pain. 'Frank—if you are going—going from me for ever—kiss me once—before I die.'

'Not once!' he says, between his teeth, tightening his grasp round her fragile wrists. The agony of the moment is so great that he feels that he must die!

'Ah! kiss—me—quick—I cannot bear

it!' she cries, a wild shriek of pain beyond endurance bursting from her lips.

'Then leave go,' he mutters, huskily, his strength of will failing him before such terrible suffering, and, as he speaks, her hands separate with a sudden jerk, and before he can support her she falls sideways upon the ground insensible.

In a moment he is by her side. Suffocated with emotion, he bends over her, and raises her tenderly in his arms and places her on the soft green turf, and, with eyes bedewed with tears, he continues for several minutes gazing into that still, pale face which he has learned to love so well.

Oh! how lovely she is looking—how sweet—how innocent—how pure! Must he really yield her up? Is it impossible for him to extend his forgiveness further? Can he not bring himself to overlook her sin? He loves her so madly—so devotedly—and she—*she* loves him—loves him with the same wild, all-absorbing

With a great cry he starts to his feet. He is conscious that all his strength of mind has utterly deserted him, and he

knows that he is lost unless he goes at once. With one wild, distracted look around him, he turns away, and then he pauses irresolutely, and in another moment he is on his knees beside her, kissing her fiercely on the face and lips.

'Diana, my love—my darling—I forgive you—good-bye—good-bye for ever!'

With a hoarse, choking sob, he springs to his feet, and, without looking back, he hurries from the spot. They have separated for ever in this world! Never again will they look upon each other's face!

Like some mad thing bereft of its natural senses, he tramples through the yellowing ferns and undergrowth, not knowing, not caring where he goes or what becomes of him. All is lost—the day, which began for him so fair and bright, has come to a sudden and fearful end, and joy, contentment, peace, and happiness have been obliterated from his life in the overwhelming darkness of the night.

The dusk is falling, and a thin mist, creeping slowly up the courses of the many

mountain streamlets between the projecting spurs, gives a *triste* appearance to the world of hills. A cold, chilly wind is blowing in sudden fits and starts through the trees surrounding the hotel. The sun has set behind a bank of lowering cloud-land, the bright and glorious day is over, and there is every prospect of the advent of a stormy night.

Within the darkening chamber of that little hut surmounting the grassy slope above the tennis-courts may be discerned the figure of a man sitting by the table, with his head buried in his arms. So quiet does he remain in that position that at first sight he gives the impression of a man asleep from sheer physical weariness; but he is not asleep, for occasionally the silence of the room is broken by a sudden gasp, a stifled sob, an inarticulate cry of suppressed agony—and then again all is still.

It is Frank Grandby lying there a prey to the bitterness of his great despair. How long he has been there, he does not know —he is too bewildered, stunned, crushed in spirit to be capable of taking count of

time. He only knows, vaguely and unconsciously, that when he first burst into the room, with dishevelled hair, blood-shot eyes, and face as pale as death, the sun was shining and all was light, and that now the room is darkening quickly from twilight into night.

For hours, he was incapable of thought. It was as though a hideous orgy of satanic revelry was being held within the temple of his mind, and everything seemed red, blood-red, to his tortured feverish sense of sight. How the moments passed, he could not say—afterwards he could remember nothing. Perhaps he slept, perhaps he became insensible—he never knew.

But now consciousness has returned to him, and with it, as in the case of a drowning man, the memory of the last few weeks is rushing with a fearful rapidity through his brain. He sees himself again as he first appeared in Doonga, weak in health, but joyous and happy in the consciousness of his existence, and the contrast between then and now presents itself before him with cruel, merciless accuracy of delineation. A low sob of agony escapes

him. What power of evil has brought him to this depth of shame and misery? One by one the links in the chain of incident rises unbidden before him, and he traces again his own steps through the maze of platonic love, leading surely but insidiously to physical passion. Ah! mad fool that he has been to have allowed himself to be so deceived!

He sees it now—he understands fully the worthlessness of the character of the girl whom he has learned to love—he comprehends only too well the utter fatuity of his recent line of conduct. Little incidents, which at the time of occurrence appeared to him without significance, now rise before him in countless shoals, all of them pregnant with meaning, and all pointing to the same miserable fact—his obstinate determination *not* to see—not to see that which should have been plain and self-evident to the veriest tyro in the study of human nature. He has indeed been blinded by his passion and self-conceit and fancied superiority of discernment!

And what has been the result of this lamentable persistence in the belief of his

own ideal? He has been broken, bruised, crushed—his tenderest feelings have been torn to shreds—his heart has been pierced and lacerated through and through—his honour and manliness have been trampled underfoot, for he has (unwittingly, it is true) ruined the life and happiness of the man who has loved him always as a brother.

What can he do to wash out such an ineffaceable stain? How can he ever hope for forgiveness? In what way is it possible for him to atone?

As he asks himself this question, a hand is placed upon his shoulder, and he jumps up with a sudden start. So engrossed has he been with his own sad line of thought that he has not noticed the door open, nor has he heard the footsteps wearily approaching him. But now as he springs to his feet, a low cry of anxious pain escapes his lips, for in the deepening twilight he perceives the figure of his friend, sorrowfully regarding him.

'George!' he whispers, in awestruck tones. 'George, my friend—is it you?'

'Yes, Frank, it is I,' says the grave voice of Grafton. 'I have come to you to ask

you for your forgiveness. No—Frank, not a word. I know what you want to say—that it is for you to ask forgiveness, not for me—but you are wrong—it is for *me* to humble myself before *you.* What you did to me was done in all unconsciousness—I know it now, and I knew it then, but I was mad with rage and hatred against all mankind, and I let drop words then which now I would gladly recall, which now I pray you to forget and forgive. Frank, dear old boy, will you take my hand and say that you forgive me?'

'George, I have nothing to forgive,' he cries, in a broken voice, seizing him by the hand. 'You have always been the ennobling influence of my life—every good and great thought that I possess has come from you; you have been my best and truest friend for years; you have loved me, and cared for me, and tended me always like an elder brother, and how have I repaid you? Unconsciously I have been instrumental in bringing your life to ruin. But for me—but for my blind insanity—you and she might have lived happily together as man and wife.'

'Not so, Frank,' replies Grafton, in a

subdued voice. 'We could never have lived happily together. You have not ruined me—you have saved me. I was blinded, even as you were, by her wiles and witcheries, and I had a perfect faith in the integrity of her character. But now I know her as she really is, and I raise my heart to heaven in thanksgiving as I contemplate the abyss into which I might have fallen.'

'Yes, yes; but—but for me she would still be true to you.'

'Frank, I know all. Besides the cruel deception which she has practised on you with regard to me, I am now acquainted with the story of her early sin. Walking down the street, I met Loftus, a friend of yours. How he knew my name I do not know, but he came to me and earnestly implored me, as a friend of yours, to extricate you from the awfulness of your position. Whether he knew my relationship to—to her, I do not know; but from his manner, though he tried his utmost to conceal it, I fancy that he did. Frank, he told me all. *You* were noble beyond the usual run of men—you forgave her that hideous blot upon her life. *I* cannot pre-

tend to such nobility of character; never should I have been able to have brought myself to overlook such a terrible shame in one I called my wife. I should have shrunk from her with loathing horror, and my life would have been wrecked for ever. It is to you, Frank, my dearest friend, that I owe my escape from such a truly awful fate.'

For some moments there is silence, the two men, still holding hands, each wrapped in their own sad line of thought. Then Grafton speaks.

'Tell me, Frank,' he says, quietly, 'how you left her.'

'I left her in the wood, lying insensible beneath the tree. Ah! George, I love her, I love her!—my heart seems breaking as I speak. I did not dare to remain till she revived—I could not trust the intensity of my feelings.'

'Then you have renounced her—given her up for ever?'

'I have,' he says, with a sudden tremor in his voice—'I have given her up for ever. I had to choose between the nobility of your character and the worthlessness of hers, and I did not hesitate a

moment in my choice. But ah! George, the struggle was almost more than I could bear; I felt myself on the point of succumbing when she fainted. And now—and now I am so weak, I have no trust, no confidence in my strength of will. Will you help me, George?—will you save me from the awful danger which may yet overwhelm me if I have not a protecting hand to guide me over the next few weeks? I feel so shattered in body and mind that'

'You may trust in me,' says Grafton, with an affectionate pressure of the hand. 'To-morrow early we will start for Kashmir—I have already given directions to my servants to prepare our kit—and there we will travel about together in the unfrequented districts, and mutually strengthen one another—for I, too, Frank, am broken down with sorrow. Bring both gun and rifle; we will go madly in for sport, and try to forget the past.'

'We will,' Grandby murmurs, returning the pressure of the hand, 'and perhaps in time we may succeed. God grant we may! Yes, George, my dearest friend, we will trust in one another for support—we will

strengthen one another with our mutual love; for an affection such as ours, pure and strong, trustful and enduring, calm, spiritual, and fraternal, ought to be more than sufficient to compensate us, as the years roll by, for the love which we have lost.'

L'ENVOI.

Extract from 'The Lahore Civil and Military Gazette,' September 14*th*, 1885.

'A gloom has been cast over Doonga by the news of the sudden death of Miss Diana Forsdyke, only daughter of Colonel Forsdyke, of the Commissariat Department, Sihayipur. We regret to say that the deceased young lady met her death from an overdose of laudanum, which she had taken, presumably, with the intention of deadening the pains of neuralgia, from which she had been suffering acutely during the course of the day. The melancholy aspect of the circumstance is enhanced by the fact that only two days previously the announcement of her betrothal to a young officer of the Royal Artillery had been

made public. The greatest sympathy is felt for him in his sad bereavement. The funeral, we understand, will take place to-morrow at eleven a.m. The whole of Doonga, it is expected, will attend.'

THE END.

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